

TO THE READER

KINDLY use this book very carefully. If the book is disfigured or marked or written on while in your possession the book will have to be replaced by a new copy or paid for. In case the book be a volume of set of which single volumes are not available the price of the whole set will be realized.



Library

Checked
1974-85

Class No.

F 823 181-85

Book No.

D 77 T

Acc. No.

4898 ✓

14

THIS YEAR,

NEXT YEAR. . . .



NEW FICTION

ELECTRIC LOVE	7/6
By VICTORIA CROSS	
CHASTITY	7/6
By JOAN CONQUEST	
CHRONICLES OF A GIGOLO	7/6
By JULIAN SWIFT	
BOSTON	10/6
By UPTON SINCLAIR	
FLAMES OF VELVET	7/6
By MAURICE DEKOBRA	
UP NORTH	7/6
By CAPT. T. LUND	
NUMBER 56	7/6
By CATULLE MENDES	
JIM TRENT	7/6
By REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN	
THE JUNGLE	7/6
By UPTON SINCLAIR	
OIL	10/6 and 5/-
By UPTON SINCLAIR	
THE CRIMSON SMILE	3/6
By UPTON SINCLAIR	
THE SALE	7/6
By JOAN CONQUEST	

T. WERNER LAURIE, LTD.
24 & 26 WATER LANE, LONDON, E.C.4.

THIS YEAR,
NEXT YEAR....

BY

JAMES WEDGWOOD DRAWBELL



Published at Cobham House,
24-26 Water Lane, London, by
T. WERNER LAURIE, LTD.

A J - Cullen

Acc no 8898

D 823 77 T

TO MY MOTHER

31
7/14/56.

First published April 1929
New Edition August 1929

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY THE DUNEDIN PRESS, LTD., EDINBURGH.

INTRODUCTION

"THIS Year, Next Year . . ." is a strange book. One begins it with the feeling, "Here is one of the ordinary light novels of the period. Well done, of course. But not particularly worth while."

But as one gets farther on in the tale, one begins to sit up and take notice of it. One asks oneself—or at least I did—"What is Mr Drawbell driving at? Is this a light novel, after all? Isn't there something more in it than mere clever story-telling?"

It is only, however—and this shows the art with which the thing is done—towards the end of Fay Sharon's amatory history that one realizes she is something more than just a "modern girl."

Actually—or so at least I see her—Fay Sharon is *the* modern girl. In her, Mr Drawbell's art has symbolised, and crystallized, the whole problem which faces the surplus woman; who presents, in all probability, the most serious social problem of our day.

There are two million such surplus women in England—women in their late twenties or early thirties, whose one desire, when all the camouflage is ripped away, is the old desire of every woman—her own man, her own home, her own children. But the men are not there! And even when the man is there, he may not be willing to endure the curtailment of freedom entailed by monogamy.

Fay Sharon's amatory fate provides no general answer

INTRODUCTION

to this problem. Indeed, there is no general answer. Despite all our so-called sociologists, despite all our so-called philosophers, despite all our ethics, and all our Churches, and all our laws, we remain—and eternally—individuals. And it is, and will always be, as individuals that we must resolve our own individual problems.

I am glad, therefore, that Mr Drawbell has not attempted to provide any solution of his problem. All that he has done is to show us—and, I think, with consummate art—Fay Sharon's individual amatory case. But it is a vitally interesting case—and all the more interesting because of those one million, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine other Fay Sharons, whose thoughts, even if they refuse to admit them, are to-day running along similar lines to Fay's.

Whether those lines will lead to sex-reform, or sex-anarchy, only the future will show. But if monogamy, as has been suggested, is only a question of mathematics, then monogamy is already tottering to its fall.

GILBERT FRANKAU.

[This introduction did not appear in the earlier editions.]

CHAPTER I

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

(i)

SILENTLY, with the merest suggestion of lazy protest in their movement, the two girls in front of the lounge fire made way for Fay Sharon as she held out her hands to the blaze.

"Don't bother," she said lightly, straightening her long slim body and crushing the butt of her cigarette against the holder on the mantelpiece. "I'm just going out."

She pulled her white cloak closer and peered into the mirror.

"My God!" A tragic whisper; a grab at her bag. "I thought so! You can't see a thing in the rotten looking-glass in my bedroom. They've got the lights purposely arranged so that your face looks like a nigger's. This club wants"—she dabbed at her nose with a powder puff—"much better!"

The lounge clock struck eight.

"It's a mistake getting down before your man comes," said the dark shingled girl at the fire. "Good to keep him waiting, don't you think?"

Fay Sharon smiled. "Not when the play's 'The Imperfect God'."

They looked up at her. They had always to look up at her, even when they were standing side by side, she was so indecently tall, so marvellously slim. 'A man's body, of course,' said the nasty members of the Club, and laughed. But she did not look like a man as she stood beside these two, warming herself, touching her hair,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

ping her suspender against her leg, giving a final polish to her nails with the palm of her hand.

She was full of contradictions. She carried her height easily and gracefully. You looked at the artificial yellowness of her shingled hair and were surprised to find it natural. You were glad to see that her eyebrows—not the thin, pencilled lines you had expected—had not been “plucked.” You did not know, of course, that they had been “plucked” in that particular style. She was one with the hundreds of pale, oval-faced young women who decorate the West End of London in the evenings. It was difficult to decide how much of her beauty was due to attractive frocks, clever make-up and skilful backgrounds; how much of her indifference was disguise; how much of her coldness was lack of passion or abundance of control.

Her type duplicated her at all the theatres, restaurants and dancing clubs within a three-mile radius of Piccadilly Circus. At one and the same moment she was stepping into a car at the *Café de Paris* (allowing the Coventry Street gapers a provoking glimpse of a silken ankle); or standing with a man in the lounge of the Savoy Hotel, tapping her gold heel impatiently on the red carpet as they waited for a taxi; or running that strange gauntlet of onlookers' stares as she went imperiously into the Pavilion for one of Mr Cochran's famous first nights.

She was indistinct from the many pretty women who every evening eat unappreciatively the good food at the smart restaurants, disturb decent playgoers with their late arrival in the stalls and their laughter at the wrong moments, and dance most of the night—tireless, expressionless, ageless—at the dull London places which provide discriminating people with such an excellent reason for going abroad. At a first glance she was their type. If people looked after her at all it was probably because of her unusual height, not because of her beauty,

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

or the expression in her pale blue eyes, or the tender curve of her undoubtedly generous and tempting mouth. But the girls in the Georgian Club had long ago learned not to sum up people at a first glance. Especially people like Fay Sharon.

"So the play's the thing?" said the dark girl.

"Always. Didn't Byron or Bacon or someone say the same?" answered Fay Sharon, and her voice was disappointing—flat, toneless, lacking warmth and emotion. The voice of the type. Almost like the voice of the dark girl to whom she spoke.

She glanced impatiently at the clock. The other girl, an elfin thing with queer, brooding black eyes, watched her narrowly and hugged her knees.

"Tell me something, Fay," she said, and her voice had the same concealing note as the others.

"Anything you like—within reason."

"How do you have such an awfully good time and remain pure?"

"My dear!" She raised her eyebrows in mock horror. "I said within reason."

The brooding-eyed one—Paddy Raine to her friends; 'that Irish slut' to her enemies; 'me little bit o' Shamrock' to the woman who brought breakfast up to her bed every morning and forgot for three mornings each week to mark the extra sixpence against her—shook her head impatiently.

"Oh, that is within reason!"

"In the interests of popular education? Or just for your own private information?" The same tired tone.

"For the good of womanhood, if you like. But do tell me. It's simply marvellous the kind of time you have."

"And you just a country cousin, Fay," the dark one broke in. "When you came here first you weren't quite so—so emancipated as you are now."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"I remember the time she thought kissing was the name of a town in Somerset," said Paddy Raine.

"Now she wishes it was."

Fay Sharon laughed outright. "You're funny, you two. But I'm not telling, Paddy. It's much too intimate! And you're too young. I'm keeping my secret for the Sunday papers! I'm going to capitalise my adventures. When I'm old and destitute I'll be a FAMOUS BEAUTY REVEALS SECRETS OF AMOROUS LIFE."

"But it'll be too late then. Seriously, Fay——"

Three other girls came into the room and strolled toward them. They had just finished dinner in the Club.

"A villainous meal," one said loudly, tonelessly. "What they do with all that money we pay them, heaven only knows." She broke off, seeing Fay, to exclaim: "Look! It's the parson's little daughter off to the bright lights once more!" She sank into a chair. "Won't someone please write home and tell her poor old father how she's carrying on?"

They laughed. They had grown used to Fay Sharon and the shafts directed at her by "Lousy" Greening (a twist of her Louisa they all used both when talking to her and about her). "Lousy's" criticism of the older girl's gay time was a thing known to them all. They knew that it arose from envy and her own knowledge that she was not sufficiently attractive to induce men to spend money on *her* behalf.

They pushed their way in front of the warming blaze. There was only one fire in the centre of the long lounge and it brought all the girls who wanted warmth into the one circle, resulting in some little physical discomfort but not a little mental and moral enlightenment. The serious-minded girls who might have preferred to read or sew and keep warm at the same time, had of necessity to sit beside the women who passed the evenings pleasantly in the retailing of animated and colourful

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

stories which dealt sometimes with women, frequently with life, but always with men. They could, of course—these virtuous ones—have remained aloof, and suffered the cold in the proud knowledge that they were defeating the devil; they could even have retired to the privacy of their own bedrooms and lighted their gas fires; but usually they were to be found in the group, their books lying closed on their laps, their sewing idle against the foot of a chair. After all, it was “unsociable” to remain aloof in the same room, and expensive to keep a gas fire going in the bedroom. And they never suggested to the Club Secretary the advisability of having another fire built into one end of the lounge.

Fay Sharon looked down at the faces and thrilled because she knew that in a minute the door would open and Graves, the porter, would stand with the knob in his hand and say in his melancholy voice: “Miss Sharon.”

And she would stay by the fire for another minute just to keep Ronnie Anton waiting in the hall, not that she really believed men appreciated that sort of thing, but because she knew women did. Then she would sigh gently, murmur some inanity about being home with the milk in the morning—‘if it’s a good cow’—draw her cloak closer to her slim body, and go casually from the room, leaving a storm-cloud of gossip and scandal to burst on her departure.

She knew it. She had heard it about other girls, that first winter in the Club, four years earlier, when, knowing few people in London, she had been one of the unfortunates who sat watching the luckier members go out, night after night, to dinner and theatre parties. They would talk of her as soon as she was gone, and discuss the different men who came to the Club to take her out. Her enemies, who called her “darling”, would talk blithely of love—‘What a blessing the Illegitimacy Bill will be to some people’—and the few girls who regarded

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

themselves as friends would urge them not to be repressed old spinsters. Before the group got down to their stories, Fay Sharon's name would be mentioned many, many times.

She did not care. When she thought of them—which was seldom—she felt sorry in a vague, unthinking way. She knew that some of them were lonely, and many envious, and she guessed why. When she thought of herself—which was often—she was glad she had left them far behind.

There was now a ceaseless movement in the circle. Fresh arrivals from the dining-room noisily demanded space before the fire. A few girls in evening frocks, waiting like Fay for people to call for them, stood lazily posturing in front of the mirrors, doing the odd little things that women always find to do before going out, the things that mean so much to the women themselves and nothing at all to the men who are with them. They wandered about the room with a fine pretence of calmness, but nobody was deceived. They wanted attention; yearned to be noticed; longed for someone to say enviously, 'What! Going out to-night again!'; desired above all to flaunt before the other girls the evidence of their own desirability in someone's eyes. Just as the other girls did when they were fortunate enough to be taken somewhere for the evening.

There was this nightly parade in the lounge, this last-minute triumph of the lucky ones. They were not all going out with men. Some were; others were meeting girl friends; one was waiting for a taxi to take her to her father and mother, who had come up to town and were staying at one of the big hotels; another was going to a lecture on Expressionism in Art with a long-haired man she hated. But all of them, by the gleaming light in their eyes, and the flush of expectancy on their faces, and the tremble of joy that quivered them as they stood

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

there, might have been off to some passionate assignation in the moonlight with a dark-eyed lover who would renounce the world for their slightest smile.

The clock struck the quarter hour.

"A bad sign when he keeps you waiting like this, darling," a thirty-eight-year-old modern girl said sympathetically.

Fay smiled. The Club taught all the girls how to do that.

"My appointment is for a quarter past," she said, and lifted her head expectantly as Graves appeared at the door.

"Miss Sharon."

"Thank you, Graves. I'll be there in a moment."

She lingered, although her impulse was to go straight out to Ronnie Anton and show her annoyance at his lateness. Fifteen minutes! It was unlike him. She hoped his wife had discovered nothing of the friendship, but that was his funeral if she had. Fay had nothing to worry about. She had drunk the wine he had paid for, eaten the food, seen the shows. Kisses in homeward-bound taxis, lots of loose talk between dances about the times they'd have in the future—which now, troubled, she hoped he hadn't really believed—gay flirtations on the river: that had been her friendship with Ronnie Anton. One or two foolish letters ('What an ass I was to write these') and just a shade too much of her time. That was all she had given him. Surely he could explain away the letters if his wife had found them.

She shrugged her shoulders and left the room, closing the door behind her.

(ii)

In the hall young Dick Webster came eagerly to meet her.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Right on time," he said, his boyish face breaking into its usual grin. "I've got the car outside. We'll have a wonderful run."

Then his eyes took in her evening cloak, her bare yellow head, her golden slippers. His smile vanished. "I say, what are you all toggled up for?"

She stared at him, and suddenly she wanted to laugh. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the door open and Ronnie Anton come into the hall. He caught sight of them immediately and stopped in surprise. Then he turned his back on her and waited. But it was a tiny hall and she knew he would hear, no matter how quietly they talked. It was a pity.

She put her hand on Webster's arm. "I'm terribly sorry, Dicky, but I must have mixed things a bit. I thought it was to-morrow night we were going out in the car. I'm afraid I've got another engagement to-night."

Although she was not blind to the humour of the situation, she was annoyed that it had arisen, and blamed herself for her own carelessness. At the same time Anton had helped to bring it about by being so late. If he had arrived to time, Dicky Webster would have missed her.

But the first thing to do was to get rid of the boy.

There was a glint of soft appeal in her eyes as she spoke. He responded to it, being a boy of eighteen, and eight years younger than she. Ten years later he might have said, "Why, you told me that this would be the only night-out you'd have this week, and that you were simply longing for it. And here you are, all dressed up to go out with another man. What d'you think I am?"

Instead, he grinned broadly at her, and said, "Of course, it was to-morrow, Fay. Sorry I made a mistake."

She gave him a look that set his heart fluttering. "You darling," she whispered.

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

"But what about to-morrow night? Can I come round for you then?"

She hesitated. It was an awkward business. She wished she could see the face of the other man. Her course of action might more easily have been determined.

"Better 'phone me first, Dicky. If I've mixed things like this I'll have to see how I stand with the rest of my week's programme. What do you think it is—senile decay?"

He laughed, and looking at him she forgot for a moment the waiting Anton. It was too bad to disappoint this nice boy, who was eager to give her such a good time for so little in return. It would have been much better for him if he'd been annoyed when he discovered her foolish mistake, and glared at her and called her things and even been bitterly disillusioned. Much better. He'd have gone away then, probably cursed her a bit, and found someone nearer his own age.

She smiled at the turn of her thoughts. This unusual consideration for someone other than herself was touching. She decided it was time for him to go before she started thinking of herself as his mother.

"Be a sport, Fay," he urged. "Let's fix it up now definitely for to-morrow night."

She could see Anton behind Webster, and, behind Anton, the porter peered out of his den and wondered what had happened. He was just too far off to be able to hear the conversation, but he had not been porter in the Georgian Club for five years without knowing more about women than he had learned from his wife.

Fay said, "No, Dicky; 'phone me first. I'll let you know then when you can see me."

She held out her hand. "Good-bye, Dicky."

He hid his disappointment. "Nighty-night, Fay. Make it soon."

She watched him go to the door, waved as he turned

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

at the steps, then raised her eyes and met the cool gaze of Ronnie Anton.

She sighed. "Too bad, isn't it?"

"Too bad. A nice youngster."

"He's quite a darling. I shall miss him dreadfully."

She said it softly, and the man fingered his silk hat impatiently.

"And that's the end, eh?"

"Yes." She looked at him frankly. "'Fraid it is."

"Bit rough on the boy, isn't it?"

"Maybe you'll benefit, Ronnie."

He smiled, a faint frowning smile. It cracked his rather hard face, and made him almost good-looking. But it was gone in a flash, and he shook his head slowly, moodily.

"But why end it like that? It seems sudden to me."

"Do you know, I thought you'd like it better that way."

"I might—if I could believe it was true."

"And you can't?" She watched his face as she waited for his answer. He was obviously irritated, the more so because he knew he had no cause to be. Her friends were her own affair; she had a perfect right to be friendly with as many men as she wanted. She had always been careful not to thrust them on each other's notice, but she naturally assumed that they knew they were not the only fish in the sea. Ronnie Anton, hard, cynical, married, had puzzled her before with his foolish moods of jealousy.

"Let's put it that I can *hardly* believe it, Fay," he said. "This boy, now: I'll swear he's the same boy you promised to get rid of months ago."

How silly this kind of thing was! She began to feel impatient with him. Why couldn't he drop the subject and let them get away to the play and enjoy themselves? Some men were too funny for words!

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

"Ronnie," she said, "as a matter of fact this is exactly the same boy."

"I thought so."

She raised her eyebrows at the jarring note in his voice. "Well?"

"And you said you were finished with him then."

"I've said it to-night again."

He chuckled drily: "Well . . ." and shrugged his shoulders.

She saw Graves watching them curiously. Two girls who had come out from the lounge loitered in the hall to make discoveries.

"I think we'd better go now, Ronnie. We're hopelessly late for the play in any case."

She stole a sidelong glance at him as they walked to the door. He looked grim and unfriendly, and she was annoyed with him for it.

Graves held the door open for her, saying, "I'll be sitting up for you, Miss Sharon. Just give the usual ring."

She nodded. Anton nodded also.

"Graves may not have to trouble," he murmured as he handed her into the taxi.

"Not have to trouble?"

"No." He turned to the driver. "Take us into Hyde Park; just drive around; go slowly, and be back here"—he looked at the watch on his wrist—"at a quarter past nine."

Fay showed her surprise as he sat down in the gloom beside her. "A little dramatic, aren't you?"

"Not a bit. I'm just feeling it's about time we had a real talk."

He was taking the thing seriously! The old jealous mood was on him, and the evening looked as if it would be thoroughly spoilt.

"What about the play?" she asked.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Oh, let the play look after itself. We're not going!"

Fay Sharon sighed wearily and lay back in her seat. "Ronnie, if the world has a more complete fool, I'd like to see him."

"Than me?"

"Than you!"

They turned into the park, and the rumble of the Knightsbridge traffic softened behind them. She made herself as comfortable as possible in the taxicab, hoping he would work his mood off quickly and that they would yet get the silly business cleared up in time to see at least one act of "The Imperfect God." She did not believe for one moment that he was going to take her back to the Club. They went slowly past the park benches with their entwined lovers, but Ronnie Anton had no eyes for them. His chin was down on his gleaming shirt, and in the light of the passing lamps his face still showed hard and hostile.

It was quite foolish of him to be jealous. He knew it, and Fay Sharon knew it. He meant nothing to her. She had always been equally certain she meant nothing to him. They had passed pleasant hours together in many ways; they had danced a lot, talked quite a lot; flirted at times when she had thought it good for him.

"If you had told me you were going to be like this," she said coldly, "I could have gone to the play with someone else."

"I didn't know I was going to be like this—as you put it." He did not turn toward her as he spoke.

"And is it all Dicky's doing?"

"It isn't his doing at all, Fay. It's yours."

There was a trace of weariness in his voice, as if he had begun to see that the affair was too tiring to talk about. She would rather have had him indignant. For all her annoyance she did not want him to become indifferent. He counted for little in her scheme of things, but he

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

counted. And the last thing she desired was to let go her hold of anything, or anyone, that counted.

She made an effort. "Ronnie, be reasonable! You don't suggest for one moment that I should cut out all my friends just to please you, do you?"

"I know I've no right to expect it."

"But *do* you expect it?" She turned in surprise, but could not see his face. "I never knew that."

"Quite frankly, Fay, I don't know what I expect with you. I never know."

"Ronnie, that's absurd."

"No, it's fact. It's just exactly what I feel. I never do know where I am with you, and never have known. Time after time I've tried to be what I think it is you want me to be to you, and the moment I become it you smile in a way that suggests I could be something nearer."

She was silent. He went on: "It's almost as if you did it deliberately to keep me wondering."

"Am I as bad as all that?"

"I'm sorry, Fay, but it's what I feel."

She had an uneasy suspicion that he was becoming master of himself and the situation. The anger had gone out of his voice, and he seemed in the gloom of the taxi to be examining their friendship and analysing it for the first time.

"You know it is so. Often you've pulled me up short when I've been wanting things, told me quite definitely there was nothing doing, and then led me on to want them again. Haven't you?"

"Your imagination is working overtime this evening, Ronnie. That's all nonsense."

"What about the night at Blake's party?"

She did not answer. He waited and then said pointedly, "You're rather a tease, Fay."

She winced.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Something of a man-tease. I hate to say it, but I believe it. You know what I mean."

"I belong to an enlightened Club, Ronnie."

"I just want you to see it as I see it. If I had known where I was with you, I would have been the last to complain. I've no kick, really. I'm a married man; I don't love you; you don't love me. But we've got on jolly well together—or, at least, I think we have. And if I'd known where I stood with you—one way or another—I'd have played up accordingly. But you've been one thing and appeared another, and you've had me guessing all the time."

"But, Ronnie," she protested, "it's not been as bad as you make out. I've told you definitely how I look at things."

"And then acted as if you hadn't heard yourself speak. Do you remember that day at Brighton?"

Again she was silent.

"A man keeps on hoping, Fay."

"Don't I know it?"

"And I'm afraid I'm only a man."

She said impatiently, "But there's been nothing like that between us, really."

"Not on the surface. It's been there all the time, though. And I believe you knew it and kept it going. Let's be frank with each other, Fay. What's the use of beating about the bush?"

"I never do."

"No, you're pretty open—in speech. But you're damned close in other things."

"What's it all about anyway, Ronnie? Are you trying to psycho-analyse me or something? Why all this to-night? Why can't we forget it and go off and enjoy ourselves? Why choose this moment to be unpleasant?"

"Because it's been in my mind for some time."

"And you haven't had the courage to say it?"

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

"I haven't had the opportunity."

"And what's behind it, Ronnie?"

"I'm really getting tired of things as they are." He spoke slowly. "We're playing a kind of cat and mouse game with each other that's getting neither of us anywhere, and it's a bit tiring."

"I see." She shot him a swift glance. "This is quite a surprise. You want to cry *finis*?"

"I think I do."

She said cruelly, "Taking a revived interest in your wife?"

He moved his head quickly toward her. "That's a bit below the belt, isn't it?"

"Why? Seems to me a perfectly reasonable thing to say." She was more at ease in attack than in defence. She was so conscious of the weakness in her own barrier that it gave her a momentary thrill to discover his and hurt him through it.

She rather wanted to hurt him. It was easy for him to sit here in the taxi and talk about a cat and mouse game. Of course it was a game. Had he ever thought it was anything else. She wondered why he could see only one side of the game, and that side his. His, the safe, easy, inconsequential side. Like all men. Men only saw their side; they took everything for granted, thinking life must always be as it appeared on the surface. They had such taunting words ready to throw at you if it wasn't.

"What exactly is a tease, Ronnie?" she asked.

"You know perfectly well."

"No; I said I did; but I don't. Not quite. I'd like to hear what *you* mean by it."

He told her, bluntly, since their affair seemed now definitely over, and he could, like a man, deliver himself at its end of the criticisms he had been too timorous—or still too hopeful—to make while it existed.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Women are cruel to men, aren't they?" she said thoughtfully, when he stopped.

"Don't laugh at me, Fay."

"I'm not. I don't feel like laughing. Believe me."

He talked for a few minutes more. It always amused her slightly, this valedictory lecturing and moralising of man over the head of the thing he had hoped to demoralise. But to-night its humour seemed a trifle thin, and the mood was on her to hate him for it, not to laugh.

She interrupted wearily: "Here endeth the lesson, Ronnie."

The taxi was crawling once more through the gate into Knightsbridge. The light from the electric standards invaded it and banished the gloom. They turned and looked at each other, frankly, steadily. Her right hand lay against her knee, and he reached out his left and played with her fingers, without feeling, without meaning.

"Sorry, Fay," he said at last, his hard face softening. "I'm awfully sorry."

"Don't be. That's just sentimental nonsense because it's ending. You're really quite glad."

A hundred yards away, the Club loomed into sight. She said quickly, "You've been quite a darling, Ronnie. Thanks for all the ripping times. Do something for me now, will you?"

He turned, and she saw the surprise in his eyes.

"Let's go to that show together," she said.

"Why?"

"Oh, never mind why. Let's go."

"But we're an hour late."

"Then take me somewhere, Ronnie."

"But where?" He was perplexed.

The cab wheezed to a stop in front of the door.

"Oh, anywhere," she said quickly, desperately. "Let's go to the Savoy and dance. Or to—anywhere, Ronnie!"

A GIRL GOES OUT FOR THE EVENING

The taxi driver waited. The man beside her stirred impatiently.

"Don't you think it's better ending it like this?" he asked. "We can't do any good going and dancing together again after the things I've said, Fay."

She stared at him. Why couldn't he understand, the poor fool, that she wasn't bothering about what they did together so long as she could dodge that crowd of grinning, grimacing, questioning, sneering faces in the Club.

"Ronnie, will you? Please!"

His hard face was creased with peeved lines of irritation and impatience.

"Really, Fay, I think it would be a mistake."

"Oh, damn you!" she whispered, tensely, viciously.

She rose quickly, flung open the door, swept across the pavement and raced up the steps, speeding past the amazed Graves without a backward glance.

She ran up the two flights of stairs to her own room, and fumbled for the handle of her door. The corridor electric lamp was only a few feet away, and usually she could find it without difficulty. But now, with anger and humiliation smarting her eyes, she groped unseeingly. She did not switch on her light when she went in, but reached for her low armchair and dropped into it.

Ronnie Anton's taxi was just moving away from the Club doorway in the street below. The horn hooted, as if in derision. But she did not hear it.



CHAPTER II

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

(i)

SHE sat in the darkness, and the first thought that forced its way through her confusion was : " What a fool I was to come rushing past Graves like that. He'll know something's misfired, and the story will be all over the Club to-morrow. I shall look an ass."

She relaxed in the chair. " Damned fool," she said aloud, and the sound startled her. " Hello," she thought, in the stereotyped burlesque way that the Club forced on most of the girls after a time, " I must be going looney. First sign : talking to oneself. And aloud, too. Bad case, this ! "

Burlesque was the Club's great camouflage. It was the pose adopted by every girl when she talked of her personal affairs—when she was forced to talk of them at all. Through it, heart-tugging matters became airily dismissed bagatelles ; crashed love affairs assumed the character of droll incidents in a long lane of life filled with laughter. Life itself was one great joke—if you took it the right way. Burlesque was the great Club deception, and rather a futile deception since each girl knew it for such and pretended she did not. They played up to each other when confronted, and catted each other when separated. " Yes, it's all off," one would say, in mock grief. " He was too much of a cave-man for me. I couldn't stand all that hair on his chest ! " And the other would reply : " And so expensive in razor blades if he took to shaving it off, my dear ! " But away

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

from each other, one might perhaps weep—privately, secretly—and the other would be telling an interested fireside group that “the poor fool didn’t know how to keep the man when she had him.”

Fay Sharon, to whom the pose had seemed novel and rather courageous when first she arrived at the Club, had quickly adapted it to her own moods and needs. “A tragedy—hopeless tragedy,” she had heard one girl confess to the group when questioned about one of her men friends who had stopped calling for her: “Too terribly tragic. It had to end. I discovered that his people came from Wigan.”

They laughed. Fay Sharon stared. It had been on her first night at the Club.

“Wigan!” a loud-voiced woman said, “My God! You should have waited till you were married to him. It’s a ground for divorce!”

Fay Sharon said quietly: “I’ve never been to Wigan. Is it as bad as all that?”

And they turned and stared at her, and she knew she had made a ghastly error, without guessing why. It was afterwards that she came to know that burlesque is only a clever disguise so long as everybody knows it is a disguise and acts accordingly.

They gazed at her in an awkward silence. Anyone could see she was a new-comer, with that questioning look in her eyes, and the foolish way she had of putting feeling into her voice when she spoke.

“Yes, Wigan’s pretty awful—I suppose,” someone answered at last abruptly, and they turned their backs on her.

She was glad. When they did not look at her she could examine them and listen closely. She pulled her long legs into the deep armchair and, unnoticed, sat and absorbed them. They were tremendously interesting.

She saw through the flat, unemotional voice at once.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

It was an armour, of course. She guessed that it was for Club purposes only. Outside, these girls could get music into their voices whenever they wanted; but in the Club it was different. If you shut your eyes, you could scarcely tell which girl was speaking. She tried. The ball of conversation rolled round the group, passing lightly and mockingly from one to another.

Quickly she caught the drift of the burlesque emotions and saw the value this pose might have for herself. Because they had need of this armour, it had come into being. With it they shielded themselves against jeers, against criticism, against—perhaps—feminine pity. Because each had a private, secret life of her own—a life of her own dreams and longings and sorrows, they had apparently agreed that, collectively, the individual life did not exist. They were amazingly alike in their language, they aped each other in gestures, their facial expressions might have been cast in the same mould. Seen in a group they resembled some of those music-hall turns of “sisters” whose blood-relationship begins with the rise of the curtain and ends with its fall. Whatever takes place in the dressing-room is unknown to the people in the audience.

The younger ones differed ever so slightly from the others. Fay Sharon noted the difference because she guessed its reason, being at that time only twenty-two and labelled as a young one herself. Behind the veil of their eyes there flickered now and again a dimmed light of amused contempt. It was the contempt of youth that knew of the comedy behind the mask. They believed, those young ones, that life would yet give them what they sought, that the Club was only the jumping-off ground for bigger adventure, that their day was to come. But they did not show the contempt openly or too often, for contact with the other girls had taught them, and several thrusts at life had strengthened the fear, that the

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

whole business of getting what you wanted was much more difficult than it had seemed several years before, and that the day might even dawn when the Club had ceased to be the jumping-off ground and had become the permanent background of their lives. Even the girls who sported engagement rings did not flaunt their success. The men of Britain had become an uncertain lot in that post-war year of 1922 when Fay Sharon left home to come to town and the Georgian Club.

They were not marrying men. Most of them, coming bankrupt out of the war, had remained in that state. The lucky ones who had avoided bankruptcy had developed a disappointing tardiness in asking a girl to share their hearth and home. An unfortunate cynicism regarding marriage had made its appearance, and young fellows had begun to question the wisdom of working like the devil for a delightful creature that they might love one day and hate the next. The desire for a "good time" which had started with the war and had been nourished by it, continued in the years that followed the war. Men who had lived easily, gaily, dangerously, taking love and life where they met it, wanted to go on taking love and life where they met it.

They found it easier to take in a country which had but lately been made aware of its two million "surplus" women. A puzzling air of condescension began to be discernible in the approach of young men to young women; and the young women, rebellious and humiliated, but vaguely conscious of the cause, had quickly adapted themselves and their characters to the new conditions. Still in their hearts hoping for the eternal things that feminine instinct desired, but knowing that the law of figures and the law of England—if not the law of Nature—were against them, they disguised their femininity, became unattractively and hypocritically independent, and suppressed their womanly longings. They

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

thrust brave, no-man-for-me faces at the world, cut their hair a little shorter, used slangier language, smoked more openly in public, powdered a bit more, laughed at their foolish elderly critics, got their doings recorded in bold print in the press, beat man at many of his own games, and went on hoping.

Fay Sharon went on hoping until she was twenty-two. She hoped openly, frankly, and without shame or disguise—a frankness that had probably more to do with her local reputation of being “rather a fast thing” than any actual immorality on her part. At twenty-two she found herself, not without tears, still a virgin. No neighbour within a mile of her father’s vicarage would have believed it. The parson’s daughter had long ago become the subject of countless stories similar to those usually associated with parson’s sons. She had begun early, but then the war had started when she was in her fifteenth year, and “you can’t blame Fay,” her mother would say; “blame the war.”

The war had precipitated the flapper Fay into the woman Sharon. She ceased being a girl the night the troops marched past the vicarage on their way to the new camp just outside the town. They all stood at the door—her mother, with a soft expression in her face as she measured the homelessness of the marching men; her father, grey, stout, a little husky, fervently patriotic; her brother Tom, silent and wistful, a year older than she and wishing it were three; and Fay herself, with a sudden wild new fluttering at her young breast (at which one hand gripped unknowingly, while the other played behind her back with the long plait of her golden hair), a quickening warmth in her cheeks and a glad confusion in her eyes as they met the bold admiring glances of these mysterious men.

Life had only then revealed its immense possibilities. At a bound she was into it, her girlhood cast behind her,

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

arms opened wide in welcome for its joys, its sorrows, its *anything* that it cared to send along.

Its tragedy lay in the departure for the front of the men with whom, almost at regular intervals, she fell in love. There were many men, mostly gay young officers; once an elderly colonel who should have known better; once—the first one, as a matter of fact—a queer, dreamy-eyed person who was called a private but who was really a poet. She had been too young to appreciate him. If he had come into her life ten years later she might have loved him and understood him, but at sixteen when one is tumbling for a tilt at life one has very little sense of values.

His name was Wayling—Peter Wayling—and an awkward figure he made in his khaki uniform. But it was his eyes she loved. It was always eyes she loved. She discovered that later. She never saw a man after she looked into his eyes. If they were the kind that thrilled her, she did not notice the rest of him. If they were not, the rest of him did not matter.

They had met at the camp canteen which the local women organised in the early days. She was too young to take the thing seriously; Wayling was too wise to expect her to. But they spent hours together, the man finding in her a warming comfort after the cold disillusioning monotony of the army, Fay Sharon drawing from him the things he could tell her about life. She liked to watch his eyes while he talked, the thrilling way they would suddenly light up in their quiet depths as if a brown candle were burning behind. Only once had he kissed her. It was the night before he went to France. Three weeks later he was killed.

The family had known nothing of him. She hugged this first dear friendship with a man to her own breast. Life went on. The war went on.

Another man came, a cheery, red-faced subaltern who

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

carried an introduction to her father. They were thrown together a lot. It was the job of girls, in addition to doing all kinds of work for the troops, to keep the "boys" happy. Fay did her bit in this direction with the others. He was attractive, man-about-townish, with an easy bearing and a fine taste in whisky. He liked her. He would keep her body as close to his as he could contrive in a dozen reasonable and ridiculous ways. He took her to dances, and they went often to the local theatre. He touched her with his hands more often than she cared about. But he was too much of a gentleman to attempt to seduce the daughter of the man to whom he had carried an introduction, although he was fond of quoting Omar Khayyam's quatrains on the joy of living for the moment, and more than once he wished aloud that he could show her what a good time he could give her in a week-end in town.

He went to the front. He wrote once. Afterwards she learned from someone in the camp that he had got into a mess with a Frenchwoman who had insisted on his marrying her. The family heard of the affair, too, and Fay's mother was shocked. Fay wasn't. She was growing up in a generation that did not blush easily. A new frankness was creeping into life; a candour. Hypocrisy was no longer a virtue. She was not surprised at her subaltern's lapse. She had never loved, but only liked him. She shed no tears, not wanting to, but made a resolve to watch in future the men who quoted old Omar.

Another man. A queer stick, a captain, who asked her to marry him the first time they were out together, and then confessed he had a wife and three children. A confusing sort of person altogether, with whom Fay never felt quite at ease, but who interested her because for hours he would forget she was a girl, and a beautiful girl; and she always wanted to see at what moment he

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

would remember. He was interesting also when he remembered.

It was through him that she met Montgomery, the cold Scot with the icy blue eyes and the cynical mouth. He fascinated her. She fell desperately in love with him, but he had little liking for the tall boyish girl with the yellow hair, and she suffered tortures through his indifference. He was the first who had swept her off her feet, and he had not even wanted to. He vanished, too, without a farewell, but she heard of him through his friend. He was badly wounded, but won the D.S.O., for conspicuous bravery, and she could imagine his quiet sneer as he was decorated. She never saw him again and never heard from him.

Another man. The slipping years. The eternal war. She was almost a woman now in years, long since a woman in her contact with life and people. From each man she had drawn something that was preparing her for the future, sometimes something she liked, often something she hated. She was growing up. Time was passing. Her brother was in the army, too, no longer under age, but tenderly ripe for its greedy hunger.

She bobbed her hair. Her mother lamented the passing of the long tresses; her father, stouter, greyer, not so patriotic, had lost touch with the younger crowd and made no protest. Poor man of God, he was sorely troubled. His daughter seemed to him to be living the kind of life that should have called forth his strongest condemnation. He looked round him and saw the daughters of his greatest friends living in the same careless, joyous way.

Life for Fay became a procession of uniformed men against a background of never-ending war. She did not fall in love again as she had loved Montgomery; nor did she have for anyone that troubled, stirring affection she had given to Wayling. Wayling! How long since that

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

had happened! Poor Peter! She had almost forgotten him. There had been so many.

But she danced with men, played with men, flirted with men. All life seemed to be full of men, but they went almost as soon as they came. They stood for nothing that meant permanence, but belonged to the brutal pantomime of war, coming from darkness with their smiling, eager faces and their greedy lips and arms, and going as suddenly back into darkness and silence. They were good sorts, great pals . . . for a time.

She found herself wanting to fall in love again and be loved—passionately, lastingly. Quite suddenly she wanted to give herself to someone. Most of the men she had met thought her cold; some had even teased her on the coolness of her emotional responses. But the instinct of the far-seeing woman had been in her to suppress the natural impulses of the girl, annoying her at times but ultimately protecting her.

With the desire came thoughts of marriage. It seemed curious to her that no one, with the exception of the much-married captain, had talked of marriage. Younger girls than she were being rushed off to churches in those hectic days. Age did not much count. Nothing counted. It was strange, she thought, that so many men should enjoy her company and yet not fall in love with her—as she had fallen in love with the unresponsive Montgomery. There were all kinds of experiences, of course; awkward moments, suggestions of gay times in London, difficult situations in taxi-cabs, kisses she had not wanted to give and kisses she had, but no talk of marriage.

Gradually, there were so many men, and she was so young and had so much to take up her attention, she ceased to take them seriously. They were there to play with her between work times; they were there for her to play with. The war and everything connected with it became the rule of life. It was going to last for ever.

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

And then suddenly, amazingly, there were no men. The war was over. The gay youngsters in their uniforms had gone; the camp at the end of the town was a cemetery of ghosts and derelict huts; Tom came back to the family; the world made a grotesque effort to settle down, and life became horribly, incredibly flat.

It was unbelievable that so short a space of time could work so great a change in her life. The war had become such an established thing, and her many jobs in connection with it so regular and monotonous, that to be without the motor car she had been driving in the last few months; to be without the companionship of her girl associates; worst of all, to be without the smiling, daring men who had always made so much of her—that was like being without life itself.

The family seemed a tame affair. She would come down to breakfast, glance idly at the dull headlines in the newspapers—no more “attacks” or “offensives” or “according to plans”—quarrel with her father over some footling thing that wasn’t worth a quarrel, and wonder what to do next.

At first she had the companionship of Tom. They played tennis together, and their common war language and attitude toward life, their mutual understanding of many of the problems thrown up by the grisly business, preserved for her the background against which she had come to think of herself. But Tom had to get on with life. He left her, and lost some of the war in the helter-skelter of a daily newspaper office in Fleet Street, whence he wrote her at intervals, giving her pictures of life in London rather gaily coloured by the contact which his new calling gave him with the pleasantly abnormal affairs of the city’s everyday existence.

Even before he went she realised the enormity of the change that had come to the world. Life had slowed down; the excitement was gone; men were no longer

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

heroes in uniform, up to all kinds of devilry that you had to guard against. They were stodgy clerks in offices, be-spectacled doctors, tennis-playing bank managers.

They were an appalling discovery to Fay Sharon, who had been too young to see them as they were before they donned khaki. And they were so few! And so much a part of someone else's family! They led regular lives, ate food at certain arranged times, belonged to some other woman—mother or wife—and went home to that woman with amazing docility and even cheerfulness.

The old mystery about them was gone. They were no longer romantic creatures, coming from places that you had never heard of, bringing a subtle suggestion of adventure, a terrifying mystery, a strange feeling of uncertainty in their actions and lives and intentions. The war had made them all gay bachelors, vivid figures in a story or play, tremendously interesting. Impossible to associate them with a home in the north of England, or in Bournemouth, or in Cardiff, where people came down sleepily to breakfast, and argued over income tax, and went out huffily to work, and phoned from the office that they would be late, and talked, ate and slept like millions of other people. They had all been careless and carefree, with no ties, no silly responsibilities, no other life somewhere in the past that would be hauled out from its hiding-place to be lived again in the future.

And now these gay cavaliers had gone, and the men who had come back to the town, and to her father's church on Sunday, were uninteresting animals, asking of life no more adventure and romance but only some kind of peace and a decent job. She met them, talked with them, danced with them, and gradually she came to know that they were not for her, and that she was not for them. One day also she made the discovery that there

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

were nearly two million more women than men in Great Britain. Her father mentioned it in the most casual manner.

"A problem there's no way out of, of course," he supplemented easily. "Nature's own arrangement, and Nature will see us through it. There's a reason for it, you may be sure."

It was at breakfast. All their arguments started at the breakfast table. That was why her mother took her tea and toast in bed.

Fay Sharon looked across at her father in surprise. "Two million more women. But how will they get married?"

"Married?" Her father hedged. He was always a little afraid of her frankness. "Must a woman get married?"

"Of course she must. You know that perfectly well, father. It's a woman's first instinct."

He looked at her under his eyebrows, deciding to go warily. "I'm not sure that you're right, Fay."

"You're not a woman, father."

"No." He smiled. "I know that's my big disadvantage, my dear, but even women aren't always best fitted to know everything about themselves."

"But they know in this." She was persistent. She felt that the discovery, coming at a time when she had looked around among the men of her acquaintance and found them outside the scope of her emotional possibilities, was charged with significance. "You know as well as I do that every normal woman wants to get married."

"When she meets a man whom she grows to love, my dear, and who returns her affection." He explained it with great patience.

His daughter snorted.

"And how is she going to meet such a man if he

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

doesn't exist?" she demanded, and added with a flash, "or if he is already married to someone else?"

Her father looked up over his glasses and held poised the spoon with which he was about to crack the shell of his egg. His mild blue eyes assumed an expression of pained but forgiving surprise. In a second or two, without a word, he dropped his gaze and sadly wielded the spoon. He had always found this method of rebuking his family effective. It was his way of saying: "Fay, if you had thought a moment, you would not have said anything so vulgar. I forgive the lapse, of course, being a tolerant and broad-minded parent, but do please think before saying that kind of thing again."

Fay saw it was useless to continue the conversation. The barrier that comes down between many parents and their sons and daughters when the real problems of life crop up in conversation had been effectively signalled. She always thought of the Safety Curtain in a theatre when she saw this look on her father's face. She knew what it meant, and understood that it operated for her own good, but inwardly she rebelled and took her thoughts and troubles elsewhere.

The Rev. Arthur Sharon was a good man. He believed in God and the after-life, and worked strenuously in the faith, bringing spiritual comfort to many people in his district, but his faith was the faith of his yesterday, not the conviction of his to-day, and as a father he was about as much practical use to his children as a cough mixture is to a man dying of consumption. For all he knew, his son and daughter might still believe they were born in the gooseberry bush of nursery legend. The world with its pressing problems had passed him by. He was still simple enough, at the end of a great war, to hide from his grown up family periodicals containing articles on birth control.

So Fay Sharon kept her puzzle to herself, but she

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

looked through its eyes in all her contacts with the new peace life which at first bewildered her. She saw clearly. An early resentment of her father's laying down of the law in his family had led to an intolerance that had in turn developed in her an enquiring and analytical intelligence. She had had to think for herself to find reasons for disbelieving him. Now that intelligence was directed to the solving of her own problem.

She saw that many women would have to remain unmarried. As a woman, and an Englishwoman, she knew that the question of polygamy, while making good copy for the newspapers, did not have to be considered for a moment. There would be no sharing of husbands. She knew her England too well to think of that. But there would be marriage in the ordinary way—for the lucky ones. In a country with so many women that would mean a scramble. A pity! That meant women coming out into the open in the warfare they had always waged in secret.

Fay Sharon was frank with herself. For the others who did not get married there would be spinsterhood. But she found herself wondering: what kind of spinsterhood? Would it be the old virginal spinsterhood with its regrets, its repressions, and its eternal surrender to convention? She thought of the scores of liberty-loving girls with whom she had mixed during the war, and behind them she saw their hundreds of thousands of sisters. They were the new women.

Dimly she felt, feared almost, that they would create a new life. They would refuse to be thrust into the background. They would assert themselves, even flaunt themselves, and behind them would be the men encouraging them, flirting with them, playing with them, loving them and demanding love, but not marrying them. The alternative to marriage in the old days had been easy because it had been clearly defined. There was no

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

alternative, because there was no demand for one. Women had acquiesced in their unnatural spinsterhood. But now women had tasted life and had changed. The war had changed them. Their numerical superiority would only make them more determined to get their share of life. Longing desperately for conventional marriage, they would, failing to get it, laugh at the conventions married women tried to impose on them.

Fay Sharon saw much of this, and felt what she did not see. And in her heart she was afraid. She knew she was attractive, and could draw men to her side; she was conscious of warm passions lying dormant in her waiting for expression; but upon her there had grown a suspicion that she had little power in holding a man.

Men had come to her, but they had always gone again. They could drop her without regrets, believing there was nothing in her to arouse.

She was aware of something about her that suggested coldness. She told herself it was her defence against her own passion. But the men looked for quick results in a hurrying age, and, not finding them, drew their own conclusions.

The worst discovery of all was that there was no one in her own town that she would have cared even to kiss. She knew that if she stayed at home she would be cheated out of many things she desired. She made up her mind—quite definitely, quite deliberately—not to be cheated.

At this time Tom's letters came more frequently. They may have had something to do with her discontent; certainly they helped to force upon Fay the conviction that in London she could meet more attractive people, have a gayer time, and—get married. Or go down fighting! She was twenty-two—child enough to know she would be a child for just a little longer, wise and war-hardened enough to see that her gamble with life would be settled within the next two or three years. “By

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

the time I am twenty-six," she said to herself on the night she made up her mind to take the plunge, "I shall be married."

(ii)

But she was twenty-six and unmarried, with a jumble of experiences behind her, this night in her single room on the second floor of the Georgian Club, when she rose from her armchair in the darkness, reached for the matches on the mantelpiece, scratched one into a spluttering flame that she applied to her gas-fire, warmed her hands at the creeping red glow, and crossed the floor wearily and switched on the electric light.

"Oh, hell!" she murmured. "What do I do now?"

Then she saw the fully-dressed figure lying on top of her bed. The eyes of the girl, newly-opened in the glare of the lamp, stared back at her.

"Hello, Fay," Paddy Raine said sleepily, stretching out her arms and yawning as she sat up slowly and propped the pillow behind her. "You've got back early, haven't you? Or have I slept longer than I meant?"

Fay Sharon regarded her through cool eyes.

"Do you usually come and sleep in my room?" she asked.

The other girl laughed. "Never done it before, m'lud. First offence, and I pray for leniency."

"Then? . . ." She waited.

"Wanted to lie in the room of the pretty lady," the other burlesqued.

"But I don't understand."

"Oh, don't be dense. You know I'm not after your ruddy jewels, or anything like that. Don't force me to confess that I worship you and that, adoring, I came up here so that I could breathe the same air as you, touch the same objects, feel your atmosphere all about me——"

"—and pinch my cigarettes!"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

They laughed together, and Paddy threw her slim legs out of bed and stood up on the floor.

"Talking about cigarettes——" she began. "Oh, thanks!"

They lighted cigarettes and sat down on cushions in front of the fire. The sight of the girl had surprised Fay, but not unpleasantly, and now in the warmth, with the blue smoke curling ceilingwards and this friendly face beside her, she was glad that Paddy Raine had paid her the unusual kind of visit.

She did not again seek the reason, knowing that her questions would be met with some amusing burlesque reply. She was not really curious. She did strange things herself and allowed for them in other people. It was enough that the younger girl had called when she was out and slept on top of her bed. She knew Paddy liked her, and, liking homage, Fay was glad. She had never troubled to think much about the girl, but it struck her that she had seen more of this slight, attractive member than anyone else in the Club.

They had done little together, but sometimes they had sat at the same table for meals on the few occasions Fay had taken meals at the Club, and often they had chatted in the lounge in the evenings just before Fay went out. The kind of girl, Fay had once thought, who would be a good pal if you had time for girl pals—especially very young ones like Paddy Raine! But of course you hadn't. The thought had been a stray one, and a silly one.

There had been an afternoon, too—she could not remember how it had happened—when they actually played golf together. Oh, yes, she remembered. A man who had been going to play with her rolled up to the Club with another man who had paid him a surprise visit, and asked if they could play a foursome. And Paddy Raine had just been passing in the hall—or something—and Fay had suggested it to her. That was the only time she

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

had shared one of her adventures with anybody belonging to the Club. And she had never repeated the experiment.

Paddy Raine broke the silence. "Sorry I stayed so long, Fay."

"You didn't. I'm back earlier than I intended." Without turning from the fire she showed the watch on her wrist.

"Ten o'clock! But the play! Wasn't it any good?"

"Never saw it."

"What went wrong? Theatre on fire?"

"No."

There was a pause.

"Man on fire?"

Their eyes met searchingly and confidingly for a moment. Then Fay Smiled. "Not even that."

"What a pity!"

It was a reply typical of the Club. She did not ask any more questions about Fay's evening, but smoked steadily. Then, switching the conversation to another subject which might have been suggested by the first, she said, "I read to-night that in America there are more men than women."

"You're too old to read fairy tales."

"I expect," she went on deliberately, ignoring the remark, her eyes fixed broodingly on the smoke of her cigarette: "I expect that's why American women have such a good time and make such poor bounders of their men." She paused and added with comic impressiveness: "I wish two things, Fay."

"Yes?"

"I wish I lived in America. Or, failing that, I wish we were in the same position as American women?"

"Making poor bounders of our men?"

"You know I don't mean that. This article I was reading, too, said that in the great wide spaces of our

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Empire—I always like the sound of that; the great wide spaces—there are thousands and thousands of men who hardly know what a white woman looks like. It's quite a saddening thought, isn't it?"

"In what way?"

"I mean—for the men. Poor fellows! Out there in the great wide spaces of the——"

"Shut up! You ought to have been an emigration agent, Paddy."

"That's an idea! But just think of it, Fay."

"I prefer not to."

"No." She became thoughtful. "You wouldn't. You don't have to bother much about men, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that they always seem to be tumbling over each other to get the chance of seeing you."

"Not quite!"

"You might almost be an American woman. Or in America."

"My dear! You *are* feeling peeved about something." Fay leaned forward and playfully touched her wrist with her hand. "Your pulse is quite fast. I was sure there was something wrong with you. I think a little cod liver oil to-night, perhaps!" She played gently with the girl's wrist. "You mustn't get all excited like this. We'll have to stop you reading these nasty papers, tiddlums!" She murmured other soothing sillinesses into Paddy's ear, and then suddenly withdrew her hand and stared at it. In a flash her arm was out again and round the girl's shoulder and she was peering searchingly into her face. Paddy Raine's eyes glistened.

"My God!" Fay Sharon thought. "Waterworks! *In the Georgian Club!* Poor kid!"

"Awful glare from that blasted lamp," she said aloud. "I think I'll turn it off, if you don't mind. Much more matey to sit just in the fire glow."

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

She got up swiftly and went to the switch.

"Thanks," Paddy said from the fireplace, "but it's all right, Fay. It *was* a silly tear, and I'm an awful cry-baby. But I'm sick of all this rot in the Club. Nobody's ever serious. Everybody kids. All the time. And you—even you—when we're all alone, too."

Fay joined her on the floor again and said coldly, "Even I? What do you expect me to do when we're alone? Slob all over you and treat you as my long-lost child? Aren't you being rather silly?"

"I suppose so." She said it meekly. "It's very silly to expect anyone to take things seriously for a change."

"Very. And I should advise you to see about your nerves if you're inclined to blub like that often. You're run down and need a change."

"I don't do it often, Fay, but I think you're right about the change. A change from this place would do me good. That beastly lounge!"

"Oh, that hole! Don't let that worry you. It isn't worth it."

"But it does, though. It worries me like anything." She spoke excitedly, throwing her half-smoked cigarette into the fireplace, and drawing her knees up to her chin. She kept her eyes fixed on the fire while Fay Sharon watched her closely. "I try to get away from it as much as I can. That was why I came here to-night when you were out. I was going up to my own room, but I thought I'd come in here instead."

She added shyly, "I like you, and things connected with you, Fay."

"You can't help that," Fay said drily. "Everybody loves me!"

"If I could keep out of the lounge more I would, but I don't know as many people as you do, and don't go out as often, so I'm forced to put up with it."

"What were they on about to-night?"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"The usual. Men. And birth control. And free love. And the usual stories. You know."

"I know."

"Lousy Greening talking about the danger of repressing one's emotions. The same old subject. She said *she* wouldn't if she loved a man and he loved her. I said—I couldn't help it—that there wasn't much fear of that."

"Good for you."

"But she paid me out for it. She saw I was interested in this repression talk, and said all sorts of nasty things, looking at me all the time. It made me feel horrible."

Fay said slowly, "You're too romantic, Paddy. That's the Irish in you. You believe everything you're told."

"Well, isn't it true that you get nervy, and dried-up, and irritable if you don't get a chance of loving?"

It was a direct appeal for information. She looked squarely at the older girl as she spoke, and in her eyes there was a frank anxiety. Fay Sharon, seeking a fresh cigarette, turned away casually.

"Even if it were true," she answered lightly, "you're too young to trouble about it. You've years to go before you get the wind up. Now look at me. Am *I* dried up—as you call it—and sour and irritable. Come on, now. Out with it. Am I?"

"Of course not. But then you're not——" she broke off in confusion.

"Not what?"

"I mean—you know what love is."

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, just everything. You're quite wonderful, Fay, and it's impossible that you don't have a marvellous time out of life. You're always so happy and careless, and—oh, I don't know—it's just something about you. I envy you."

In the silence that followed, the fire flickered warningly.

"Needs another bob." Fay said rising. "Sit still."

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

"I'll feed the brute." She searched in her bag, found a shilling, and slipped it into the meter. The fire flared up. "You can worry too much about this kind of thing, Paddy. I don't think it's so important as lots of people try to make out."

"Don't you really?"

"Good Lord, of course not." She spoke carelessly, but watched the girl as she talked. "There's a tremendous amount of nonsense thrown at one in connection with it—by people who don't know what they are talking about. Don't you let it bother you for two seconds. Isn't worth it."

"Honest, Fay?"

"Of course! You'll find it all out later on." She changed the subject quickly. "You've not much to complain of, Paddy. You're damned attractive. That wistful fairy line of yours is very fetching, and men still like the fragile, old-fashioned kind of girl when it comes to marrying. I know. My child," she continued lightly, "I see a happy future for you and an early marriage. A good-looking stranger is coming into your life very soon. You will have seventeen children——"

"Shut up, Fay. Stop fooling."

"Shouldn't be surprised if there's really something in what I said, though, Paddy. There's a lot of life—and hope—left in you yet."

"But I've been in London a year now and haven't met a man who's even shown the slightest interest in me."

"That's because you haven't been interested in him, babe. The moment you see one you want, you'll soon make him eager to know more about you." Restlessly, she moved about the room. "Have a Turkish delight?"

"Love to." She took one hand away from its clasp on her ankle and dipped it into the proffered box. "But all the same, I'm beginning to believe there's something

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

in this frustrated love business. Look at some of the women in the Club, for instance."

"You mean, *don't* look at them!"

"Well, look at them if you can! If you've good eyesight that can stand a shock! It's easy to see the ones who've never been loved, and they live up to Lousy's description all right."

"In what way?"

"In every way. They're a rotten bunch of spoilsports; they're always carping and nagging; they're mean and narrow. And hysterical! Look at Podgy Raymont. If you can show me anyone who's nearer the lunacy borderline I'd like to see them. She's quite mad. Mad on actors, too. Of all people!"

"I didn't know that."

"It's a fact, Fay. She waits hours for first nights, and then gets completely carried away with her emotions. And dirty! Aren't they a dirty crowd? One night when I was feeling thoroughly fed up I agreed to go to a show with Podgy. Never again! She sat and giggled at all the smutty bits, and at all the bits she *thought* were meant to be smutty. That woman can see more dirt in a play than the author ever meant to put into it."

"And all this because she hasn't loved?" Fay asked with sarcasm.

"I believe it is. I've been reading a lot about it lately. In spite of what you say, everybody seems agreed that if a woman doesn't express herself in the natural way of love, her repressed emotions are going to play old Harry with her."

"You say it just like one of the books!" Fay Sharon put another piece of Turkish delight into her mouth, dusted the powder from her hands and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "You in love with anyone?"

"Wish I was!"

"You think it's such a jolly thing?"

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

"I don't care what it is! It's something! At present everything is just nothing!" There was a hint of revolt in Paddy's voice. "What fun do I get out of life, working in a stodgy office all day and coming back to this at night?"

"I didn't know you did that. What sort of work is it?"

"A man who sells artist's pictures to the magazines calls me his secretary."

"Sounds quite interesting. What's he like?"

"The usual." Paddy Raine reached for the sweets. "But I wasn't even tempted. Strange, isn't it?"

"That mean he's married?"

"No, that had nothing to do with it. He just doesn't appeal to me."

"What about his artists?"

"Oh, God!"

"You seem to be unlucky, Paddy; or is it that you are too discriminating? Not reaching for the stars, are you? Or still hugging an ideal?"

"No." They had been talking in the customary cynical and evasive tone of the Club, but a softer note crept into the younger girl's voice as she went on: "I don't want a hero, or a millionaire, or anything like that. I'm not so young as all that. But I would like to have a man, Fay. I'd just love to have a baby. I'm quite crazy about babies. Lots of the girls here pretend they don't want to marry, and that they haven't any use for a man, and that they'd much rather have freedom and independence, etcetera, but *you* know how silly all that talk is. They're just kidding. It only needs a man to come into dinner with one of the girls to show how excited the others get. Ye gods, I've seen them all grow animated in a moment, babbling and giggling and talking loudly—just to attract his attention!"

"Oh, I know. I've had them slipping into the hall to

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

try and get off with one of my friends when he's been waiting for me to come down."

"So you see I don't get much chance of meeting many. The men I see in business are the same old crowd—artists too hard up to be able to afford romance, and artists too well off to waste time on it."

"So you're just going to settle down, accepting things, into a dear old maid?"

"I'm not!" There was a sudden violence in Paddy Raine's voice. "I'm not! I'm going to do something desperate one of these days."

"Don't be silly," Fay said sharply.

"I mean it." The eyes of the younger girl gleamed with sudden life. "I feel it in me. I wouldn't be like the crowd in this place. I've stuck it for a year, but I'm not going to stick it much longer."

"And what do you think you are going to do?"

"I don't know."

Fay laughed. "But you are going to do it, eh? You make your decision before you know what it is you're making it about. That's quite foolish, Paddy. Has this anything to do with your wanting to be in love?"

"May be. I don't know. Don't *you* want to be in love sometime?"

"No fear!" Fay Sharon's voice was bitter. "It hurts too much."

"Hurts?"

She scarcely heard the younger girl but continued as if her thoughts compelled the words: "It's no good falling in love. It's no good feeling anything in life. The best way to go through it is to skim through it—on the surface. Don't *feel* anything. Let nothing get under your skin, whether it's love or hate, or jealousy. It's a waste of time and emotion."

Paddy Raine was looking at her in bewilderment, but Fay did not see her.

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

"The lucky people in life, Paddy," she said lightly, "are those who skim along, feeling nothing. They never get the nasty jars that come to you in the ordinary way. They just laugh and carry on: nothing affects them. I envy them."

"I'm glad you're not one of them, Fay."

"Of course I am," she insisted. "One's got to be now-a-days. Take nothing seriously. Accept things. If a man falls in love with you, take it for granted. Don't let yourself go on him the moment you see his eyes soften. It doesn't pay. In time he'll fall out of love again, and if *you* don't, he'll give you merry hell. So it's better not to fall in love at all. Same with everything else. Don't expect friends to do anything for you—men or women—or you'll be disappointed. Do them yourself. Or don't do them at all. The one sure way to make life uncomfortable is to *feel*."

"I don't believe you, Fay."

"Oh, but you must. You're just the kind of girl who'd get all soft if a man said he'd shoot himself if you didn't go away with him for a week-end. He'd probably be too mean to buy a revolver, Paddy. Or if a woman said you were stealing the only man in the world she ever loved. You'd forget that she should have learned how to keep his love. You've got to be able to pigeon-hole your emotions, darling. They're no good running wild all over the place!"

She ended on a harsh note. Paddy Raine stared at her, surprised at the philosophy, but more surprised at the breakaway from the club's burlesque by one of its most skilful exponents.

"But, Fay," she protested. "That means going through life like a fish! It's awful."

"It's safest."

"Safe! But who wants to be safe?"

They looked into each other's eyes.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Aren't you young!" Fay said sympathetically.

Paddy Raine flushed. "But I'm right, Fay. You're absolutely wrong, I'm sure of it. Safe! That's something I never thought I'd hear you say. I don't want to be safe. I want to be loved. I want to live, and one can't live safely. I want a man of my own who'll believe that I'm the one woman in the world for him. Ye gods—safe!"

Fay Sharon came down to earth lightly and easily.

"I was right about that cod liver oil, Paddy. You really are excited to-night. On the whole I think it's just as well you're not in love. It might be rather a sticky business."

"Not it," she retorted defiantly. "I can live up to the club motto: *If you can't be good be careful*. Don't you worry. By doing something desperate, I didn't mean something silly."

"Same thing, most times."

"It might be in my case, because I don't meet so many interesting people. When I *do* bump into somebody who thrills me for a change, I could very easily let myself go. But then, you see, I realise that now—before it happens—so I'm quite prepared and not so silly as I sound."

"That's lucky."

"Now you, on the other hand, are used to meeting all kinds of wonderful people. Your work——"

"My work!" Fay laughed.

"Of course. Your work must bring you in contact with all kinds of men. I'd love to be able to write like you."

Fay was glad they had got away from love. "Ever read anything I've written?"

"Just one thing. A little story in *Home Chat*. I liked it."

"Yes? Well, that was about the third of the three

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

things I've managed to get published in four years. My work! You baby!"

She laughed again, teasingly, mysteriously. Paddy Raine, with the feeling that an idol was about to be smashed, waited in silence.

"My work is just a beautiful camouflage," Fay Sharon explained. "It was the one excuse I could decently put forward to a suspicious parent when I first thought of coming to stay in town. I came up to write a great novel about London. That was the tale. I *could* write a little. I'd had verses in the local paper, and the usual copies had been sent to every doting relative in Great Britain, Ireland and the Dominions over the seas! The verses were never paid for, but what did that matter? Of course, to get local colour it would be necessary for me to live in London."

"You old fraud!"

"Can't you imagine the scene in the vicarage?" There came to Fay as she talked a feeling of bewilderment that she was for once confiding in another girl, but something of the recklessness of Paddy had communicated itself to her, and she continued airily: "What? Live alone in London, with no one to look after her? That couldn't be done. Then little Fay remembered her brother who worked in Fleet Street. *He* would do the needful if any dirty dog tried to practise navy tricks on the young and innocent girl! *He* could save her from the pitfalls of the great wicked city! If her father would only make her ever so small an allowance from that annuity of his, she would soon be able to earn enough for herself. While she worked on the novel, she could still write lots and lots of stories and articles."

She stopped abruptly, realising that the other would ask the reason for the deception. It was all right to make fun of the story of how she had got her way to live in London, but it was a different matter telling why she had

wanted it. She couldn't tell this girl that she had come deliberately to meet men, interesting men, who might be foolish enough to be interested in her.

"And has she written lots and lots of stories and articles?" Paddy asked quietly.

"Not so that everybody knows who she is." Fay said gaily. "She's had rather a good time, in a way, getting material for her big novel about London!"

"I knew my instinct was right in wanting to be able to write! If that's how you gather copy! But, Fay, you are a fraud! Why don't you give up some of that good time and get down to work? I believe you could do something worth while."

The opening for burlesque was too good to be missed by Fay.

"Ah, somebody who believes in me!" she said dramatically. "Somboddy who knows I can do it! That's all I've needed. Now I can come home in the dark hours and share my sorrows with someone who will understand. Or come with shining eyes to tell of triumph, and clasp the out-stretched hand of the pal who always stood by, who always believed. Paddy, short of writing it, the novel is already a best seller!"

They yelled together. The first tap on the door was unheard by either. The second, louder, more insistent, stopped their laughter.

"Who the devil is this come to interrupt our frolics?" Fay switched on the light. "Come in!"

Graves appeared in the doorway.

"Gentleman on the telephone for you, Miss."

"At this time! The man's not decent. Tell him I've gone to bed."

"Oh, Fay," Paddy protested.

"But it's your brother," the porter said.

"Tom! You said a gentleman, Graves. Most regrettable lapse. I'll be down in a minute." She turned

FAY SHARON PEEPS AT HER PAST

to Paddy as Graves disappeared. "Make yourself at home; don't go yet. I shall be back soon, and the night's still young."

The voice at the other end of the line was eager.

"Freak," it said, "I'm so glad you're in—for once. What's the matter? You ill? No? Well, listen: There's a new night club being opened to-night in Mayfair—the Gold Bug. It's going to be good. Would you like to come along?"

"Someone left you a fortune?"

"Don't be silly. You know that gentlemen of the Press are privileged persons. I've been *invited*. Do you get that? Well, here's something else. I've got a pal with me—a writing chap, like yourself. No, that's not meant to be a joke. He usually lives in Paris, and he's just over on a visit. Do you think you can get another girl as nice as yourself and lug her along? I'll look after her."

"What's your man like? Attractive?"

"The handsomest cove outside a film studio. Winner of the Good Looking Men Championship in 1925, after being runner-up the previous year. Is subsidised by Owen Nares, Ivor Novello and half-a-dozen others to keep off the stage! And *not* post-war. You'll like him. He's got some money!"

That amused her, but she said, "All right, I'll come along. I can fix you up with an awfully good-looking girl, but you've got to rescue me if your Messiah isn't to my liking. Where shall we meet?"

"Would you mind meeting us at the Gold Bug? I've got something else to do first before we go on the spree, so I shan't be able to come round for you. Make it eleven-thirtyish. I'll tell you where it is."

He described the location of the new club—it was in the usual obscure and unknown lane—and Fay wandered back to her room.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Here's a chance for Cinderella," she said to Paddy. "Like to go to a new night club with naughty Fay Sharon and two wicked but handsome men?"

"*Like* to? Ye gods!" She put her arm round Fay's waist and hugged her. "I'd love it!"

Fay disengaged herself and looked at her. She was a very slight little thing, but her eyes were on fire, and there was about her a suggestion of vitality that went oddly with the broody wistfulness of her. She might have been a girl strayed from the dreams of Fiona Macleod, Fay thought. And then into her mind there came back her own words . . . "a good-looking stranger is coming into your life soon" . . . and suddenly she wished she had kept Paddy out of it. It was only for a moment. The eyes of the girl gazed back at her—glad, eager, rather adoring, she thought. A dear kid. But so young! Well, well. If the handsome stranger did prefer the elfin type—what of it? Life was in the lap of the gods. Sometimes things were good, sometimes bad. Accept them. But that would mean two men gone west in one night. Two!

She shrugged her shoulders. "All right, Paddy. Slip along to your room and get on a frock. I'll powder my nose a bit and join you in a minute. And tell Graves to get a taxi."

Paddy was gone with a whirl. Fay turned to her table. A picture of Ronnie Anton, mounted in a silver frame, stared up at her. She gazed at it, then reached out and released the catch. The picture fell out. She clasped the frame together again and put it down on the table. Empty and blank, it looked back at her. Almost like a question, she thought.

CHAPTER III

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

A LAUGHING, chatting crowd of men and women jammed the entrance hall of the Gold Bug. They had come on from the theatres, and as they waited for friends, or sought cloak-room information in this new and unfamiliar resort, or hung about admiring and criticising the colour scheme and decorations, they swept the place with a gush of such language as is tolerated only in one city in the world.

"My dear," lisped one strong man with an army bearing and navy-wide trousers, "he wath marvellouth. In the third act he carried the house. I never saw such acting. Sickeningly wonderful!"

"Darling," shrieked a pale, heavy-eyed woman to another, "you simply mustn't miss the play. There's a most gorgeous murder. It gave even *me* a thrill!"

"—A topping show if you've had a good dinner——"

"—Never saw such legs! What the jolly old censor is thinking about——"

"—It's divine, precious! She throws off her clothes half-way through the play——"

"—They say she's having an affair with——"

"—I get only fifteen miles to the gallon on my car, old man, but she'll do eighty——"

"—Then we went on to the Florida and finished up at four ack emma in the——"

"—Roy! You darling. What are you doing here? Thought you were——"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"—There's that awful woman with that awful man again——"

"—Don't touch 'em, old boy. The shares are sure to drop——"

"—What a rotten place this is. I'm terribly disappointed. You told me——"

"—No. Just a dash of absinthe, idiot. The best way to mix it is to——"

"—*Of course*, she's his mistress, angel! Can't you put two and two together——"

"—There's too much sex in it, to my mind, but——"

"—He's got the most marvellous eyes——"

"—Such vile hunting. And Mabel had told me——"

"—They say he was caught coming out of her bedroom——"

The racket, heightened every few minutes with a burst of unrestrained laughter, gathered strength as new parties arrived, to be greeted with yells of recognition from people already thronging the narrow hall. Perspiring attendants, eager to please haughty young men whom the gods might care to make regular patrons of the club, and urged on by anxious overlords, moved skilfully among the press of people, giving soft-toned information to loud-voiced enquiry.

A small cloak-room just off the hall, proving ridiculously inadequate, was crowded with impatient, good-natured men, the overflow swelling out into the path of newly-arrived guests and adding to the general confusion. The strains of a jazz band, raucous and blaring, came from the ballroom, at the foot of a short flight of stairs.

Had the confusion been staged it could not have been managed more perfectly or with greater knowledge of the men and women there, for it created that noisy atmosphere of a large, all-in-the-swim-together party that has become essential to the success of any enter-

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

tainment in the West End of London. The individual mind could not exist in the hullabaloo. It became part of the glaring lights and the noisy talk. It released its hold on itself and became a blur, merging in the bewilderingly animated, slightly hysterical whole.

The club was going to be a marvellous success. You could not doubt it. Tom Sharon said so, enthusiastically, as he fought his way to their side when they arrived.

"It's great! Bound to go after an opening like this. If the food is only half decent, and the cabaret only third rate, the place is a success. Everybody's so amused at the rugger scrum. They're in a good mood before they've even started to enjoy themselves!"

"You got shares in the show?" asked his sister, a little annoyed at her buffeting across the hall.

"Wish I had! But I'm glad, all the same. I like to see things successful. I hate failures."

They stood side by side, amazingly alike in features and expression. He had Fay's blue eyes, and her generous mouth, but his mouth seemed more ready to smile, and his eyes more eager to twinkle, than hers. And he looked younger than she, although he was her senior, but it may have been his air of enthusiasm that suggested the boy rather than the man. He was looking at the scene with frank enjoyment and his eyes gleamed the same expression as he smiled at Paddy Raine and drew forward his companion into the murmur of introductions.

Paddy Raine sensed in Tom Sharon many of her own qualities and weaknesses. His readiness to enthuse appealed to her. Thrilled herself by the gay well-dressed crowd, she responded to the eager smile that suggested a common bond. They chatted easily together as the four made their way to the stairs, Fay going in front with David Musgrave, who was rather silent, rather sad, and not a bit enthusiastic.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

He was as tall as Fay—their shoulders levelled as they pressed close together through the crush of people—and he looked very lean and athletic in his well-fitting tails. “Lots of riding and hard work, probably,” she thought, photographing him in a comprehensive side look. “But moody, and rather uncared for. Bachelor! Thank God!”

His lean brown face smiled at her, almost unwillingly, as she left him at her cloak-room, but there was friendliness in his eyes—unexpectedly warm brown eyes—and a livelier interest than was suggested by the rest of the face. She found herself puzzled, by him, but pleased. “Very, very difficult,” she summed him up, as she powdered carefully. “Knows what he wants. He’s been through life. That’s the sadness in him. And he’s probably cocksure no woman can make him do what he doesn’t want to do. So he goes on being a bachelor. Nobody to look after him—that’s obvious. You can always tell that hungry look in a man’s eyes. But a real man! I’m glad I came.”

She finished aloud, “As for you, Paddy, you’re hopelessly in love with Tom already. No, don’t blush; it isn’t done. You look as if he’d already bought you a copy of *Wise Parenthood*.”

“I like him,” Paddy said frankly. “He’s awfully good-looking, Fay.”

“Runs in the family, my dear.”

“But your man’s terribly interesting. Bit of a mystery to me, though.”

“Ah, that’s ’cause you’re very, very young. Leave him to mother. *She’ll* take care of him!”

The Gold Bug was proving a real gold bug to the people who had launched it. The tiny handkerchief of dancing floor between the masses of tables was packed with a crowd of people. Dancing was impossible, but to the melodies of the blaring band, which now seemed to

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

have softened its blare in the din that accompanies eating at all midnight haunts, men moved over the floor, an inch at a time, smiling into the faces of the women in their arms, telling stories as they moved, or whispering intimacies that brought their heads very close together. About the tables there sizzed a splutter of conversation.

They battled their way to the table which had been reserved for them, close enough to the dance floor to be convenient, but just far enough away from it to be safe. "Trust me," murmured Tom. "Father will look after you," revealing such a markedly similar line of thought and expression to his sister, that Paddy noticed it even in the hubbub.

They found themselves so closely jammed that their elbows touched elbows with people at the next table. They tried to order food, had their voices drowned in the applause that marked the end of a melody, had them drowned again in the blare of the orchestra's encore, laughed their needs into the ears of the waiters as they stood up to dance, looked at each other and made megaphones of their hands, and were on the floor. Fay Sharon felt the arm of Musgrave tighten round her. It held her firmly yet flexibly. She liked it. She was in a mood to be at ease with this man. Something in her relaxed. He gave her the feeling that he knew all about her; that she need not be too far away from her real self for at least one night.

They could not dance, but they moved smoothly together with the crush, shuffling a bastard fox-trot step when an inch of space permitted, Musgrave protecting her unexpectedly well from a battering, and both getting real pleasure from the movement and rhythm. She could tell from his lead that he was enjoying himself. It gave her the opening to say:

"You don't often dance in London?"

He had to bring his face very near to hers to hear,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

and to answer briefly, "No," and he kept it there waiting for her to speak again.

"Paris must be very thrilling. I've never been there."

"No? But you will some day."

He said it with a certain conviction that puzzled her, and with a pleasant smile that meant anything.

"I didn't know you could tell the future," she teased.

"That isn't prophecy. It's just commonsense. You're bound to go to Paris some day. You look as if you enjoyed life, and you're young, and you write—so Tom tells me—so in the natural order of things you're bound to go to Paris. Just as you're bound to go to many other places."

"I'm not so young," she said, following his lead as they manoeuvred into an oasis of floor.

"That's too bad. You're very good at disguises."

He smiled merrily, but his brown eyes were keenly observant, and the thought struck her that the brain behind the eyes was very alert; too alert for a night club in the West End of London.

"How old do you think I am?" she asked.

That gave him an opportunity for a long, searching look, and she hated him when he answered, "I'd say twenty-seven or twenty-eight. But I'm a rotten guesser."

"You are, rather. I'm not nearly that."

He surprised her by murmuring, "What a pity!"

"Pity?"

"Of course. I think twenty-seven or twenty-eight a most interesting age. I'd have most people born at that age if I could arrange it."

They chuckled together, heads very close. The band ended its melody in a whisper, and they moved apart. Slowly they went back to their table.

The others were just sitting down, and Fay said, "Soon I won't be able to dance any more, children; Mr Musgrave says I look terribly old and haggard."

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

Tom stared at her.

"Who the devil is Mr Musgrave?" he asked. "Oh, you mean *David*! In heaven's name, Fay, you don't mean to say you're going to call the man *that*! Play the game! Why, Paddy and I are old friends already. Aren't we, Paddy?"

Paddy, less like a fairy and more like a schoolgirl out on the binge, agreed readily, but Fay answered primly:

"But old maiden ladies don't go in for that sort of thing with gentlemen they've only known a couple of minutes, darling. Remember the aged! I know that customs have changed since my day, and I'm all for progress and a good time for the young, even though they do smoke too much, but what I say is——"

"Have a cocktail!" they yelled at her, "and dry up!"

"Now that's an idea! What is this you're trying to induce me to drink—David?" She looked into his eyes as he handed her a cherry-topped glass. "Is it one of those awful things that lead girls astray?"

He said gravely:

"I call it a Barney Google. And it's particularly praiseworthy in the direction you mention. Police of seven countries are unanimously of the opinion that crime flourishes on cocktails, and statistics show that three murders follow the drinking of every B.G. There is a medical recommendation in the state of Yugo Slavia that every girl drinking a B.G. should be accompanied by an elderly female friend."

"B.G.?"

"Barney Google."

"Oh, I thought you meant it had something to do with N.B.G. Same thing, I should say, if your quotations from the *Police Gazette* are to be relied upon." She sipped tentatively, then nodded her praise. "*That's a cocktail.*"

"Sometime I'll show you how to mix it."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

He said it carelessly, the offer following naturally on her praise, but Fay looked at him over the rim of her glass and was glad that his eyes belied the casualness of his words. There was a message in them. She could not tell what it was, but she knew that between them there was understanding.

It gave her a warm comforting feeling. She felt detached from Paddy and Tom, and guessed that when Musgrave spoke his words had a meaning for her that was different altogether from his meaning for them. She felt that there would never be between Musgrave and her the oceans of silly misunderstanding that most people spent their lives in turning into understanding.

And she sensed what he meant by his remark about ages. He was the kind of man who would have no use for the girl who was ignorant about life. He would not take the trouble to teach her all he knew. He wanted only the people who knew already. So that they could converse without speaking, sympathise without gushing, respond without being asked to. So that they could understand him. He had reached a stage in life where it was a bother—if not actually a pain—to make himself clear to people. If they couldn't understand him without a lot of silly talk, then he wasn't interested in them.

Looking at him while he talked to Paddy, she saw he was older than she had at first thought. There were invasions of grey in his dark hair, and the keen lean face looked tired in repose. Thirty-five to thirty-eight, she guessed, and he'd taken a stiff hurdle somewhere on the road. She wondered what it had been.

"Don't get melancholy even if you are getting old, Fay," her brother teased. "I hear they're going to try to get the pension for people of sixty now."

"What a comfort!" She would have kicked him under the table for his tactlessness at any other time. But it gave her no disquiet now. Musgrave half-turned

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

toward her as he heard the remark, the same baffling smile on his lips, but he resumed his talk with Paddy, without their eyes meeting. Fay felt he had been going to reassure her on something, and then had known she would realise it was unnecessary.

But Paddy said indignantly, "Why, Fay's not old. She's just a growing baby!" and that brought them all into the discussion again.

"David's to blame," Fay said. "He swore I was the image of the woman who had her picture in the papers this evening with the interview on How I Brought up a Family of Ten on a Pound a Week. Started congratulating me, the brute!"

"Come to think of it," her brother mused, "there is rather a resemblance."

"Oh, you think so?"

"But David has a weakness for that sort of thing. He likes people with experience. I put it down to the strange belief of his mother that allowing a child of three to play with Old Moore's Almanack was an excellent training for a literary career. Now, babies to-day——"

"I don't think we should discuss babies with Paddy here. I've just been trying to persuade her that there's no truth in the fairy tales they tell in the Club that babies are born on bushes. Poor child, she clings hard to her illusions."

"Paddy in Blunderland," murmured Tom. "And how the Club must have changed!"

"Tell me about the Club," urged Musgrave, more serious. "I'm interested."

"Some other time, David," Fay promised. "Let's be cheery to-night, please. Look, here's the show on."

The lights faded out, stilling the buzz of talk to a sudden magical hush. The band played a waltz melody. A silver sword of spotlight split the darkness, wandered questingly round the empty polished dance floor, leapt

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

eagerly toward the music, and triumphantly picked out from the curtain a slim nude figure who stood tiptoe for a moment as if abashed at discovery, and then moved rhythmically over the floor in a pool of light.

A clatter of applause burst out. People farthest away clambered on to the backs of their chairs or stood up in order to get a better view. Waiters ceased serving and stood ready, a well-organised *claque*, to lead with their rehearsed din the cheer that would mark the end of the turn. At intervals they stimulated enthusiasm with fervent and foreign "bravos". But there was no need for their lead. The audience was ready to applaud the scantily-clad girl as she moved among them. On good food and indifferent wine they would have applauded anything—even each other.

She was joined half-way through her dance by a man, as nude as herself and as graceful, who stole sinisterly after her across the floor. Occasionally he handicapped himself in the pursuit by stopping to throw his arms about in passionate supplication; then he darted after her with renewed ardour, while the girl, simulating terror, tried tragically to evade his clutches. The music grew louder and more abandoned. A hint of the inevitable climax crept into the melody. The man danced himself into a fury, drawing ever nearer to the girl. Unwilling surrender became the dominant note in her slowing motions. The man reached out and touched her. She shuddered violently. His arms went round her, greedy, crushing. The music crashed out madly. Like wild things the two dancers whirled together in each other's arms, and then swiftly, dramatically, he swept the woman off the floor on to his shoulders and made triumphantly for the seclusion of the curtain, to a storm of hand-clapping.

The band stopped. The lights went up. In the excitement a bottle of wine was crashed to the dance floor, drawing a circle of obsequious waiters to the spot like

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

prancing marionettes. The dancers re-appeared, bowing, smiling, overwhelmed at the fuss.

Paddy Raine sighed rapturously, and breathed, "Wonderful!"

Fay Sharon looked round, and caught the queerly understanding eyes of Musgrave. His smile said exactly what she was thinking, and she had not the heart to kill the enthusiasm of the younger girl.

But Tom, more impulsive, protested, "Why, Paddy, that's old stuff—and not too well done. I think they've a damned nerve to have that in the show. If half the people here weren't so tight, or knew a good thing when they saw it, they'd hiss it off."

"*I'm* not tight," Paddy flashed, "although I'm living in hopes! And it struck me as being absolutely marvellous."

"Child!" He took her hand in his and caressed it, looking with concern deep into her eyes. "I'm afraid I'll have to show you something of London night life. It isn't good for the community that ignorance like this should go unenlightened."

"That's right, Tom. Take her somewhere. She needs it."

"He won't!" Paddy said with surprising vigour, and explained herself: "It's awfully good of you, Tom, and I'd just love it. But not if it's going to turn me into a cold-blooded thing without enthusiasm. If seeing lots of things, and going everywhere, makes you unable to appreciate—these dancers, for instance—where's the fun in it? I like to enjoy myself."

"So does Tom," Musgrave said quietly. "That's just a pose of his. Don't pay any attention to it. I say, isn't this food marvellous, Paddy?"

"Gorgeous!"

He smiled at her. "Gorgeous—what?"

"Gorgeous, David."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Fay said, "Fathead! He meant you to say 'Gorgeous, thank you,'" and wished she had kept silent.

"Now, here's the kind of turn that I sweat blood over," said Musgrave, drawing their attention to the programme.

The band was playing *Humoresque*. At the curtain there appeared a pale, shifty-eyed man in a red tunic and black Court breeches. He advanced slowly to the centre of the floor juggling three Indian clubs with an appearance of great dexterity. Again the conversation subsided, but the lights continued to blaze.

The man's eyes, strained and anxious, followed the clubs through the air, while his hands mechanically guided their passage. As the melody progressed, the juggler danced a slow and uncertain step.

"I know what you mean, David," Fay said. "I always feel far worse than the person himself when he drops anything. It makes me hot all over."

Musgrave nodded, his eyes on the performer.

"Not only that," he whispered. "Just think what depends on the catching or dropping of these things. Every time a fellow drops one I imagine his wife and seven or eight kids starving in some suburb. It's rather awful to think that an Indian club dropped in a West End dance place can mean the devil of a lot of suffering to a family miles away. You seem to hear the kids yelling for food."

"You sentimentalist!" Tom whispered tensely.

He looked from the juggler in surprise. "Surely not. Realist, if anything."

"Imaginative realist," Fay put in. "Oh, my God! He's dropped one!"

It was true. The club clattered to the floor, dinning the tale of its manipulator's folly for all the room to hear. There was a moment's cold stillness. Then a man laughed somewhere, but before it was finished Fay's table

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

applauded vigorously. Bravely, with a very human smile of pretended unconcern, the pathetic figure picked up the club, tossed it lightly into the air and continued his turn. They watched him intently.

"Why does anyone take on a job like that?" It was Musgrave again. The thing worried him.

"Oh, he's all right," Tom said. "Your sympathy's probably wasted. I'll bet you he's no more married than I am. Or if he is, I'll lay he's carrying on with another woman all the time. Starving kids! I shouldn't be surprised if he uses those same clubs for spanking 'em."

"Tom! You're a brute!" Paddy murmured.

"Well, come on! I'll take you all on! Let's stand the fellow a drink after his show, and I'll bet you I'm right."

"We'll do it." Musgrave agreed. "I'm interested in the chap."

Paddy's eyes gleamed. "Do you mean it?"

They nodded together, and in the applause at the end of the performance, Musgrave called their waiter and told him what they wanted.

Another turn of six dancing girls had done its naked best to confirm their knowledge of human anatomy by the time the juggler, now garbed in sober evening clothes, was guided by the waiter to their table.

"It was good of you to applaud," he said, as they crushed a chair into space that was never meant to hold a chair. "I noticed it, and was grateful. I was a little nervous, seeing it was the first night, and I was anxious to give a good show."

"You gave a very fine show," Musgrave assured him, nodding to the waiter to fill the man's glass. "It surprised me that you didn't drop more. Very difficult, isn't it?"

"Not really." He took them all in in his shifty glance, and raised his glass. "It depends upon your condition,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

I think. If you feel in good health, then you have assurance, and your eye and your confidence is good."

"Like golf," Tom said.

"I do not play golf." He smiled deprecatingly. "But probably it is the same with most things that require confidence."

Fay, putting out the feeler, said: "Then if it's all a matter of health, it's essential that there should be no home worries."

He gave her his whole attention. "Absolutely," he agreed. "Worry is a very bad thing in this line. Although, mostly, I forget everything as soon as I begin juggling, there is no doubt that matters of yesterday have a sort of—sort of——"

"—subconscious effect?"

"Exactly! Have a subconscious effect on my performance."

"We were just saying before you came that a single man without any responsibilities or ties must have less to trouble him than the married man who knows that other people depend on his success."

"But of course! My wife"—they hacked at each other's shins under the small table—"my wife worries me a great deal. Did you like her?"

They stared in surprise.

"Oh, of course, I forgot. You did not know. That was my wife, Alina, who came on first in the dance act. Don't you think she is very clever?"

Paddy, the first to recover, said enthusiastically, "I think she's wonderful."

Tom said cynically: "Her partner? Not your son, by any chance?"

"Oh, no." He laughed good-humouredly. "I'm not so old as that! But he helps to worry me too."

"I can believe that," Fay said.

When he had gone, hurrying away to keep an engage-

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

ment at another night club, Tom said: "Well, that's a reversal of my story. He's married all right, but he's not carrying on at all with someone else—as far as we know. It's evidently the pretty little wife who goes in for that."

"It's as often that as the other way about," Musgrave said.

"I'm quite sorry," Fay said. "He's a nice little man."

The band blared out a dance tune again during the cabaret intermission, and they stood up to dance. Absent-mindedly Fay turned toward Musgrave, but he had smiled at Paddy, who had nodded agreement, and the four got to the floor with Tom Sharon partnering his sister.

There were less people dancing, and more opportunity for movement, and she wished intensely that Musgrave had asked her for the dance. She watched him as he led Paddy skilfully over the floor and she could not help feeling that he was enjoying himself. The moody air he had affected at the beginning of the evening had left him—she had watched it lift as they sat at the table—and his tall black figure made an effective background for the elfin thing dancing against him. They danced well together. She noticed that.

"You're not dancing so well as usual," her brother said. "What's the matter. Tired?"

"Heavy with food. And old age. And jugglers' confessions."

"Bit of a load. What do you think of the Gold Bug?"

"Pretty much on the usual lines, don't you think?"

"Too much. How d'you like David?"

"He's good fun. A bit sober, perhaps."

"All the better for it. He's absolutely first rate, Fay." Tom's voice took on an unusually serious note. "Great chap. Major in my lot during the war."

"Awfully sad at times."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"David? I hadn't noticed that. He's had nothing to be gloomy about, as far as I know. But then he's the type that one never does know too much about."

"I can guess that."

"I think he likes you."

She suddenly caught sight of Musgrave's face, animated as he talked, very close to Paddy's head.

"What makes you think that?" she asked evenly.

"Oh, just something about the two of you. I'm an observant old devil, as you know. You must forgive."

"Of course. But I think you're quite wrong."

He did not reply. As the band stopped playing they found themselves side by side with Paddy and Musgrave. They applauded for an encore.

"Let's switch over," Tom said eagerly, as the band struck up again. "What do you say, Paddy?"

Without hesitation she agreed. Tom took her into his arms. Musgrave, smilingly amused, watched them go and turned to Fay. She was surprised to find herself eager to feel the man's arms about her again, but disappointed that his face revealed no quickened interest. But he held her closer to him, and although many men had done that with Fay Sharon before, she was keenly conscious of his nearness and of the masculinity of him.

They danced in silence for a time, the sheer joy of the rhythmic movement engaging their whole attention. When, however, she cleverly followed a silly spontaneous step of his, he said, "Good for you. I might have landed you on the floor with that."

"Well, that would have caused a sensation, anyway."

"It isn't a case of 'anything for a sensation' yet, is it?"

"With me?"

"Yes."

"Not quite. But getting on that way. Life gets a bit of a bore at times."

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

"I'd sound a prig if I said it doesn't with me, I suppose?"

"No. You're a man. It's different with men."

"So I've heard; lots of times. Why is life more interesting to a man, Fay?"

"I'll buy it. Why?"

"That wasn't meant to be a conundrum. I'm dead serious."

She clung closer to him.

"Oh, you know why," she said. "Men have so much more freedom. They get doing things that women don't get doing."

"Nowadays?"

"Even nowadays. You know it, David. At least, women don't get doing them in that careless, conscienceless way that men are allowed. When they do them it's in fear and trembling—more or less—not as a right, but as a misdemeanour."

"I suppose that's still true." He danced thoughtfully for a moment or two. "But that's passing, isn't it?"

"You've found it so?"

He laughed, "Fay!" and left it at that.

She was going to tell him some things, but changed her mind and said, "It is passing in a way. But very slowly, and quite painfully."

"Yes, I expect it's quite a painful process, mentally. But isn't it beneficial physically?"

The cleverness of their dancing deteriorated as they became more interested in the talk.

"How can it possibly be physically beneficial if it's a bad mental thing?" she demanded.

"I'll buy it! How?"

"Be serious. You said you were. Honestly, David, lots of girls are going through hell just now."

She said it softly, but with conviction. The smile went out of Musgrave's eyes. He looked at her intently.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

They were alone for a moment, miles away from the ballroom of the gilded Gold Bug, from the noisy band and the maudlin people and the leering smiles of drunken men and the giggling of their painted partners. The garish setting fell away from them, the stiflingly stuffy room became a cool grey spot for companionship, and a quietly regular life—like a pale blue stream—flowed past them within easy reach. They touched deep. But only for a moment. They were too much a part of the modern life they had helped to create to be able to stand outside themselves or their surroundings for longer than that.

"Let's sit the rest of this dance out and wait for Tom and Paddy," he suggested.

"I'd like to."

They walked back to their table in silence. Silently also he refilled her glass, and raised his own. Her eye-brows questioned the toast.

"To us," he said. Touching glasses, they drank it.

The place had grown quieter. The clatter of supper serving was over. Many people had departed, possibly for home, more probably for another night club. There were fewer people dancing, and those who still sat at tables, heavy with food and wine, were less boisterously gay. The band was softer, the waiters lazier. The confusion had disappeared; the glaring lights had been dimmed. It was as if the place and the people had not the vitality to prolong the pandemonium they had begun. One could almost see, behind the tinsel, the shutters that would soon be put up.

"Tell me more," David Musgrave said to Fay Sharon. "In the most impersonal way, I'm interested."

"Of course you are. You live. You know life. You know that things are changing in that respect, but as a man you just take it for granted."

"Not exactly. As a man I'm naturally sympathetic

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

to any change in that direction. If anybody will benefit, putting it at its crudest, surely the men will."

"It's a mutual benefit, David. It must be. It's only a levelling up—or down, if you like—of the moral standard."

"But it's not general, Fay?"

"You, as a man, ought to know that better than I. All I know is that for lots of girls it's awfully difficult."

"And you?" His eyes sought hers frankly.

She was not annoyed at the question. She felt she had already given him the right to ask it. The strange messages that had passed between them during the evening had probably told him so. But that did not mean she must answer the question.

She could not answer it. That meant telling everything. It would reveal her attitude toward life, and show that as a woman safely married she would denounce the thing as a danger to herself, but that as a single woman, thrust out of legal marriage and privilege, she might have other views on the subject. It meant showing something of woman that bachelor men should not see.

"Don't worry about me, David. I'm an interested observer of life. That doesn't mean that I'm interested only because things may affect me."

"Nonsense. Of course they affect you, and will affect you. And I'm rather prepared to worry about you."

"Oh. Why?"

"Because I like you."

It was two o'clock in the morning. She had not known this man three hours earlier. But they had understood each other quickly, and they had eaten and drunk together, and they had danced together, closely, rather indecently really, very enjoyably, and their eyes had flirted and their hands touched; and now she thrilled to hear the man say the quite ordinary thing—that he liked her—and caught herself wondering how he kissed.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"I'm glad, David. I like you."

Her fingers, fluttering undecidedly from the stem of her glass, were imprisoned in his. She looked down at them on the table. Lean, strong, brown fingers. Then she raised her eyes and looked gravely into his. There was a hint of passion in the brown depths, but the face was quietly smiling. She recognised that he had amazing control of himself and that the smile was part of it. There was about him a suggestion of casualness that gave an air of unreality to the incident.

"Cave man?" she queried.

"No. Quite civilised. Nothing by coercion or capture." Then he added quietly: "Everything only by consent. Nothing in life is worth while, Fay, when you have to batter the other man's head, or break the other woman's heart, to get it."

"David, that's a negative philosophy," she protested. "It sounds as if nothing were worth fighting for."

"Very little is," he said cynically, "but I don't mean that at all. Fight, yes! But not with weapons. What fun is there in making a woman love you by the use of a coal hammer? Force may make her pretend to, but obviously it isn't the genuine article?"

"How would you make her, then?"

"I wouldn't. I couldn't. No man could. She loves or she doesn't. Loving, she may hold out for some time on some grounds—moral or otherwise—but loving, she will surrender. Good Lord, you know all that, Fay."

"I do. But how do you?"

"And if she doesn't love you," he went on quickly, "no power or force on earth can make it otherwise. You can beat her down to your will, but what's the use of that?"

"David, I asked you how *you* knew?"

"And that's the kind of personal question I asked you a minute ago and you dodged me. We could be

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

awfully frank with each other, Fay, but we have also it in us to dodge each other."

"That's because——"

"—we don't know each other really yet. I know. And it will pass. But just now we're still groping. And life gives one damned little opportunity to do more than go on groping. Here are the others."

He stood up as Paddy and Tom rejoined them.

"Well, that's a nice thing to do, David," Tom said. "You collar my partner and then hold a petting party with her."

"Not quite, Tom," Fay assured him. "You need have no fears about me. We've been discussing the instincts of the Neolithic men."

"In their relation to present-day life?" her sceptical brother asked.

"Of course."

"Well, isn't that getting on for being a petting party?"

"What is a petting party?" Paddy asked.

Tom laughed jeeringly. "It's no good, Paddy. You can't fool me. There's no girl in the Georgian Club to-day who doesn't know that! Fay's told me too much!"

"Must be an interesting place," Musgrave murmured.

"It is," Fay said. "Come and have tea with me there sometime. You'll enjoy seeing the reaction of the girls to your visit. That's very interesting!"

"Thanks. I'd like to. But in the meantime, I've got an idea. Why don't you people come round to my flat and wind up the evening there? We could have a last drink all together and I've got a gramophone with some decent records. This place is getting a bit thin, I think."

Paddy and Fay enthused, "Rather!" Tom, slightly taken aback, said, "I had meant to show Paddy the Forty-Three Club, David. She's never been there, and I've been telling her it's all kinds of wicked places. She believes me."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Paddy's not going to the Forty-Three," Fay said decidedly. "We're all going on to David's. A great idea, David."

"I'm full of brain-waves. You want to come, Paddy? Not so wicked as the Forty-Three, you know!"

"I'll risk it!"

"Good old Ireland," murmured Tom. "Will try anything once!"

The band was playing again, but they stood up to go. It was easier now to tread a path between the tables towards the stairs, and Fay and Paddy moved away as the men tarried to settle with the waiters.

"I'm having a marvellous time," Paddy confided. "You were a darling to bring me along, Fay. I think Tom is just ripping!"

"Wisdom cometh in the morning, babe. Wait till you see him at breakfast time."

"But I won't see him then, shall I?"

"Why not?"

"At *breakfast*?"

"Afraid?"

"No fear," seeing Fay was joking, "full of hope!"

"Now you're talking!"

They had reached the foot of the stairs. Fay turned to smile at Musgrave before they went for their cloaks. He was a few yards behind her, coming on leisurely—with Tom at his side, and glancing idly round at the people in his path. She had time to look at him before he raised his gaze to see her waiting. He was obviously in high good humour, the attractive smile playing about his mouth all the time. But as she watched, a sudden change of expression swept it to oblivion. His face became strained and hard. He stopped dead, staring.

Startled, she followed his gaze.

A woman at the table immediately in his path had lifted her head, and, looking upward through a haze of blue

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

cigarette smoke, challenged him mockingly with her eyes. She was strikingly beautiful. Pale, oval-shaped face. Thinly pencilled eyebrows. Long slits of dark eyes. Black hair, clinging closely to the head. And the strangest mouth. Not thin and hard and cynical, in harmony with the rest of the face, but small and full and vividly red—like a red ripe fruit caught up in invisible lips. And throwing up the cold loveliness of her—the thing Fay noticed first—a shimmering silver frock showing alluring white shoulders and the mould of a firm breast.

She was with a man, a vague, unnoticeable man, who was filling her glass and his own as she looked up and held David Musgrave. It was obvious that David knew her; that between these two something long dead had come to life again, some deep dear thing that seared the man and amused the woman. It lingered in life for a moment as they stared at each other, beating down the self-control of Musgrave and touching his face with deep lines of tragedy. For a fragment of a minute it hovered between them, tense, uprooting, nakedly alive. And then as suddenly it died. The woman lowered her eyes to the level of her companion. David Musgrave walked slowly away from the table. And as he came toward Fay his face reminded her of the faces of men going back to the front after leave.

She turned away quickly, drawing Paddy Raine with her, and they went into their cloakroom before the men came up.

Fay Sharon powdered without knowing she powdered. A cold fatalism took possession of her; she was engulfed in a surge of self-pity. She was afraid for David Musgrave, but uppermost in her thoughts was a fear for herself. It was not a selfish fear; it was a natural fear.

The unknown woman disturbed her. At one time she must have stood for something to David, and while it

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

was obvious that her power was a thing of the past, its ghost could still wound. Whatever she had been, she was no longer, but the sight of her revived memories in the man of scenes or incidents in his life with which she had been concerned. She had had the right to move David Musgrave. Fay Sharon had won no such right.

She had naturally taken it for granted that David must have women in the background who had influenced his life. All men had. But she hated the woman with the pale face and the vivid mouth who had brought to light—and on such a night—this evidence of an influence that could only have been hurtful to the man.

Behind her hate there was a dull bewilderment. She groped in the dark to penetrate the mystery of how a woman got such control over a man. How make such an impression, that, years after it was all over, he still looked staggered when he saw you again in a night club? How did one get this monopoly of a man? How outwit and out-manœuvre all the other women who were playing for the same stakes?

It was a mystery. You were attractive and gay and a good-timer, eager to meet people, going to lots of places where you could meet them, and then discovering that the influences of other people who had met them first were still in them and had to be destroyed before you established your own. A strange business. And horribly depressing.

It was discouraging, especially when you wanted things strongly enough to take life seriously under the surface. Of course, you wanted things—in spite of all the nonsense you talked. Love, for instance. And passion. How could you help it? And what was wrong with it? It was natural. You could feel your body wanting it like the very devil sometimes. You lay awake at nights dreaming of it. It wasn't at all wrong or unnatural. But it was disappointing in its unfulfilment.

COCKTAILS AND LAUGHTER

Depression seized Fay Sharon as she powdered. It was born of self-pity and reaction. She saw herself getting old. Soon twenty-seven. Ancient. Lines round the neck. And nothing out of life to show for them. That was the damnable part—nothing at all; not one of the things you had wanted.

You had never really been sure, of course, what it all was that you did want out of life, but you knew vaguely that it was something more thrilling than the Georgian Club, and you knew certainly that it was something with a man in it. And something with peace. Not this gnawing anxiety about the future, and this pretence that everything in the garden was lovely. It wasn't.

A queer game. It seemed to defeat you, no matter what you did. Time after time you had been disappointed and had sworn you'd never feel again, that you'd just skim through life—as you had told Paddy Raine she ought to skim through it; and then along came someone like David Musgrave again and you found you were capable of feeling in spite of yourself.

No wonder a girl——

"You're awfully thoughtful," Paddy said.

"It always makes me like that."

"What does?"

"Wine, darling. By the way, you drank too much to-night."

"Kill-joy! I'd only do it when I'm with you people that I'm sure of."

People that you were sure of! Another quaint idea. Who were they, these people that you could be sure of? They didn't exist. There weren't any.

Fay finished powdering, and drew her cloak round her. They went up the stairs to the hall, where a few people clustered together yawning, tired, waited for the commissionaire to get them cars or taxis. Musgrave and Tom Sharon were waiting for them.

CHAPTER IV

FAY AND DAVID

THEY were silent as the taxi carried them along to Musgrave's flat in Jermyn Street. Fay sat with her brother, and caught sight of the face of the man opposite only when they flashed past a street lamp. He had regained control over himself, and there was nothing in his expression that she could take as a guide to the Gold Bug incident.

But there was a consciousness among the other three that a subtle barrier had been built round Musgrave. His face had become the face of the man they met at the beginning of the evening; the joyousness they had seen later had entirely vanished. Now and again, realising that he was the cause of the silence, he made efforts to plunge them into conversation, but his efforts were top-heavy and they met with dismal failure. Evidently they had all witnessed his discomfiture, and momentarily they were embarrassed. They were relieved when the cab delivered them at the door of the flat.

"I'm glad that's over," Tom muttered under his breath. "I think a stiff drink is indicated, David, don't you?"

"A very stiff one"—paying the fare. "I'll get you something worth while in a minute or two."

It was a compact little bachelor flat, and interested Fay, who had been in others. Eagerly she tried to see something of the man in his tastes, in the decoration, in his books and pictures. They told her a little, but not much, and certainly not more than she had already expected and guessed. They hinted at things without revealing—very like Musgrave himself in that respect.

And she remembered that he made his home in Paris, and only lived in London from time to time, so that all the intimate possessions which might have given her a clue to him were not in the Jermyn Street flat.

The one large room where he entertained them—he had only this, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchen-scully kind of place—might easily, with the addition of larger windows, have been an artist's studio. It breathed colour and love of colour. In the corner, near a small prepared fire to which he put a match, a huge orange-coloured divan heaped with gay cushions made a vivid splash against the quiet blue of the wall.

Tom Sharon made straight for this, pulling Paddy with him.

"We wait for drinks!" he cried. "Come on, Paddy. Let's keep warm near the fire. *Our* turn for the petting party! First shot at the divan, David, please!"

"Go ahead! I'll fetch you something in a minute."

He took Fay's cloak and disappeared with it into his bedroom, reappearing in a second. He was brisk and businesslike. Going quickly to the sideboard, he kicked up the large blue carpet out of the way, revealing the stained black floor ready for dancing. Without looking at Fay, he busied himself with glasses.

"Whisky for everybody?" he queried over his shoulder. "A bit cold to-night." He jerked round briefly in the direction of Fay. "Cigarettes and matches over by the mantelpiece, Fay. Chuck them about, please, will you?"

She moved easily to play hostess, offering the box to the two on the divan, and scratching a match for them.

"Whisky's a good idea, David," Tom agreed.

"Am I safe with it?" Paddy asked doubtfully.

"Who wants to be safe?" Fay flashed, reminding the girl, in a look, of their conversation earlier in the evening.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"All right, David. Whisky for me, too, please!"

"Good for Ireland. But it's Scotch! And you, Fay?"

She came across the floor toward him. He watched her, without meeting her eyes.

"I think mine's a Barney Google, please!"

"The death dealer?" He raised his eyes to hers.

"Have you an elderly female friend with you?"

"Not too elderly."

"Then—?"

"I'll risk it."

They stood very close together.

"I say!" bawled Tom from the other end of the room. "Is it a drink we're having or a conversazionne? Get a move on, David!"

"Just coming, sir! Fay wants a Barney Google, and I'll need some ice for it, so you two can have your drinks while I mix it in the kitchen." He crossed the floor with the two glasses. "No need to tell you to make yourself at home, I suppose?"

"Not a bit, David darling," Paddy said. "This is a most snugly divan."

"I shan't be a moment, Fay," he said, coming back to her. "Do get over by the fire. It's getting quite warm."

"Don't I get my lesson in mixing a B.G.?"

"Now?"

"Why not? I'd like to."

"It means coming out to the kitchen."

"What a hardship."

"It's rather cold out there, really."

"David!"

He looked at her.

"All right, come on!"

They went to the door together. He glanced back at Tom and Paddy. The fire was burning brightly.

FAY AND DAVID

"Much more interesting this way," he said, snapping off the electric light. "What do you think?"

"Rather!" they answered together, turning their heads in the glow. "What a nice thoughtful man it is!"

He closed the door behind them, and switched on the light as they went into the kitchen.

"Doesn't take a minute," he said with a brightness that she could guess was not genuine. She saw he was still ill at ease in spite of his determined effort to be the gay host. "I'll just chip two or three pieces of ice out of the box and we'll have the deadly mixture in a tick."

"I'm not in a fearful hurry for it, you know."

"No? But the sooner the better, of course."

"I'm not so sure, David. You'd better explain it very slowly. I'm not quick at grasping things."

She meant the words to have a double meaning, but it evidently passed over his head. If he had been thinking of the other woman, as Fay was, he might have understood. But he was thinking of the cocktail.

"You see: shove the ice into the shaker like this," he was saying, but she did not pay attention. She was watching his face, trying to recapture the eyes and the expression which he had given her so willingly earlier in the evening. It was as if a mask had come down over the face. He had locked himself away from her. She felt herself thrust out, and the part of him that he had been ready to give had been withdrawn. He had shown her a glimpse of what he could be, and then had decided not to be it. It was worse than if she had never seen him at all.

Quite suddenly, and quite foolishly, she let herself go on him. Because he did not seem to need her, she needed him desperately. She was very lonely, very miserable, very hurt. Life seemed to be trying to kick

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

her. Things went well for so long, and at last it looked as if life had turned over a new leaf. And then it kicked. And what with resisting these kicks, or preparing for them, or recovering from them, she had worn down her vitality. The great game of pretence and Club burlesque meant battle. It meant fighting with the things that were, pretending they were not. It mean drawing on all kinds of reserves of energy and strength.

And now she felt herself go limply weak. She watched this man move silently about the room, his clever fingers doing silly things with silly bottles, silly pieces of orange, silly clinky little bits of ice. It was very quiet. Now and again he spoke to her, softly, confidingly. She did not hear what he said. She saw him, not clearly, but vaguely as if in a dream. A clock outside struck the hour with solemn booming. She found herself counting One . . . two . . . three . . . and remembered somebody once telling her that people were weaker at three in the morning than at any other time. Certainly, she felt weak enough.

She felt tired and helpless . . . that she was without a friend in the whole world. She longed to see the expression on David's face soften. She wanted him to take her in his arms and soothe and kiss and comfort her. Why did he put on that difficult hard pose when she, for the first time in her life, was willing to drop hers? It wasn't fair.

Why couldn't he be nice and friendly and considerate—as he had been before? She didn't ask him to make love to her. She just wanted to be noticed—as a woman, not as an impersonal thing that needed a cocktail explained to it. She wanted him to like her, and to tell her he liked her. That was the best way of showing that the other woman didn't matter a damn.

She liked him. More than she had ever cared for anybody before. And he knew it. Didn't he want *her*?

Couldn't he see her as a beautiful woman—as other men had seen her? Why did he not want to hold her in his arms as she wanted to be in his? Was he a cold, unfeeling fish? He was paying no attention to her, his fingers continuing their silly game with silly things. Nice fingers. She would love to feel them close to her. Love to feel them against her breast. She caught her breath quickly.

He turned, offering her the drink.

"Try that," he said, and then drew back, his eyes held by hers. He put the glass down without dropping his gaze. She saw at once that he understood her message. But for a moment he did not move, looking at her long and steadily. She could not read his baffling expression, but in its place she swiftly substituted the slow smile she had loved when he toasted her in the Gold Bug, and loving him with it she took a step toward him.

His arms went round her and held her close. She gave herself up to him in a hungry, sex-starved kiss. Her arms slipped round his neck and drew his head down, holding his lips to hers. She could feel him tremble as she pressed her body to his. His hold on her tightened, strengthened. His strength seemed to grow as they clung closer. Her lips became hungrier, her body afire. She felt the flame of her passion pass to David. His eager mouth sought all that she had to give. He strained her to him. It was maddeningly, wonderfully painful.

"David," she gasped.

He held her for a moment more and then released her, reluctantly, his eyes cloudy with desire, eating into hers. But he kept one arm round her while his hand caught hers and tightened on it.

She laughed joyously. "And you said you weren't a cave-man!"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

He continued to gaze at her, saying nothing.

"David, if this is what happens before a B. G., what's it going to be like after?"

He said then with a different meaning altogether:
"Fay, what is it going to be after?"

"Meaning?"

"For you and me. For us."

But she did not want to face things. "Must there be an after?"

"You know there must." He was very serious. "Of one kind or another. We can't start something without it having some kind of an end."

"End!" she said sharply.

"Well, some kind of an 'after'."

She looked at him, and, looking at him, saw herself. There was a time in life, according to all fairy tales, when that "after" would have followed naturally the first kiss; when an ardent lover would have pleaded his cause, offered his hand and heart in marriage, carried an enchanted bride to the church on a charger, and given her his life and fortune to do with what she willed. When marriage would have been the natural "after," and babies the natural "after" to marriage.

But all that happened in fairy tales, hundreds of years ago. And sometimes it happened in real life to-day.

She met his eyes frankly, confident in her surrender. He smiled to her, and the smile cleared away some of the passion and made him seem more of a good friend than a lover.

"I'm a lucky beggar, Fay. You're an awful darling."

"More awful than darling? Or the other way round?"

He handed her the cocktail, and lifted his own. "It's cold in here. This will warm you."

"I hadn't noticed it, David. If anything, the temperature struck me as being rather high. I liked it."

She added quickly : " Kiss me again, darling."

His mouth closed on hers, not burningly as it had done before, but tenderly, like a protective caress. There was sympathy in the kiss, not only desire. She closed her eyes and lost herself in it.

" I must have that cocktail," she said, coming back to life. " Sobriety seems to be too heady for words. Perhaps when I'm not responsible for my actions I'll be able to behave properly."

" Oh, then keep sober, for heaven's sake. I like you this way. No wonder so many people join the Band of Hope! "

They toasted silently, and drank.

" David," she said, putting down her glass, " tell me about you. I like you like anything, but I scarcely know a thing about you."

" Maybe that's why you like me," he teased, half cynically.

" Maybe," she agreed quietly. " But I think I'll still like you when I know you."

His face became serious again. It was very near to hers, and she put her cheek against his, delighting in the hardness of the lean jaw.

" There's not much to tell, Fay. I'm a pretty ordinary sort of chap, you know. And besides this is a horrible spot for you to be in. It's beastly cold. Let's get back to the fire, and throw these two out here for a change."

" I knew you were a cave man! And I think you're right. It's cosier in there. But don't throw them out, David; let's talk afterwards."

" Afterwards? "

" Couldn't I stay on a little after Tom takes Paddy away? Couldn't we arrange it? I'd love to."

" Do you mean it? " Hope leapt to the man's eyes like a flame in a fire. " I hadn't dreamed that you would."

" Why not? "

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"I don't know. Except that I know as much about you as you do about me."

"All the better reason why we should get to know each other, David."

Still holding her hand, he opened the door leading to the passage, switched off the light, and touched the handle of the door of the other room.

"Better knock!" Fay advised. "It may have been catching!"

He smiled and knocked loudly. There was no answering call from inside.

"It is catching," Fay murmured. "I bet they're buried in the divan! If I know anything of Tom—and Paddy!"

David banged on the door. Still silence.

"Well, if you don't mind taking a big risk," Fay said, "let's walk in on them. Ready for shocks?"

He nodded and they opened the door and went in.

The light had been switched on, but there was no sign of Tom Sharon and Paddy Raine. They crossed to the fire. Pinned to a cushion was a large sheet of paper with a pencilled message. It read:

"WHO SAID I COULDN'T TAKE PADDY TO THE FORTY THREE? THAT'S JUST WHERE WE'VE GONE. BLESS YOU, MY CHILDREN!"

They laughed together.

"Saves me a lot of physical exercise," Musgrave murmured, pulling a low armchair over to the fire for her. "Make yourself comfy, Fay."

"No. You sit there, David. Shove me over a couple of cushions and I'll sit on the floor between your knees. It's much more matey."

"You haven't tried it too often, have you?"

"Not too often. But I can imagine it would be very nice. And don't you think *we* might have that light out also?"

FAY AND DAVID

They sat in silence for a time after he had switched off the light, her head resting against his leg, the man's fingers playing gently with her hair, and softly tickling her ears, which, bending down once, he kissed. It was soothingly warm before the fire. Easily, she could have fallen asleep. She was tired, but happy. She had surrendered herself to David Musgrave in a way she would have believed impossible had someone at the Club prophesied it. A delightful refrain was passing through her brain. This time is different, it sang; I don't care. I don't care. It's going to be wonderful, and I don't care what happens.

And then in contradiction, she said aloud: "Who was that woman, David?" but the effort to utter the words did not arouse her. She had thrown them off sleepily, like a tired child saying "good-night." The answer would come back, softly, caressingly—"good-night." And she would fall asleep.

The answer came back, quietly, honestly:
"My wife."

And Fay Sharon was wide awake, and sitting upright, her head away from him, staring at him as if he had struck her. But he had been more prepared for her surprise than she had been for his announcement. He returned her gaze frankly, moodily.

"Pretty awful, isn't it?"

She summoned up the little that was left of her courage. She felt ill and wanted to cry; wanted to hit David and hurt him as he had hurt her.

She said, bravely: "It is, rather," and added weakly: "I didn't know you were married, David."

"I'm not really—now. I haven't seen her for seven or eight years. We separated not long after we were married, as a matter of fact. Ours was the usual kind of war-time affair."

"Divorced?" she said quickly.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"No."

She turned away, leaned her head against his knee, and gazed into the fire. There was an uncomfortable pause.

"The thing was mostly my fault, I suppose," Musgrave said. "Nobody's to blame except myself, and the war, and youth, and all the things that usually are to blame."

"Tell me about it, David."

"It's not too pleasant a story, Fay. I'm afraid you wouldn't care to hear it."

"I think I've got to hear it."

"I've never told anyone about it."

"Isn't that more reason why you should tell me?"

His hand came back to her head and his fingers played with her hair.

"I think it is, Fay."

She said, "Was it the war, David?"

"Yes."

"Lots of things were, weren't they?"

"Too many things," he said. "But you know what it was. Ten years ago life was a pretty hectic thing that looked like ending any minute for thousands of fellows. It did too. Many of the rest of us are only getting now what we asked for then."

"Asked for?"

"Well, not quite. But circumstances forced us to do the things we did. I didn't want to get married, for instance. Hadn't the least desire to. Most fellows at that time hadn't. It's easy enough to see now that what we were all suffering from was a sort of sex hunger. Natural, too, after months of trenches and mud, and men, men, men all the time." He gathered his thoughts and went on slowly, "You see, there were so few women in one's life at that time. No women at all, really, no love—except, of course, the usual, unsatisfactory sort

FAY AND DAVID

of thing that you could buy behind the lines. That didn't satisfy the majority of men, who craved for the sight of something decent and feminine and sympathetic. Especially after doing without all the good things of life for so long."

Fay Sharon kept her eyes fixed on the fire.

"We didn't know then what was wrong. When a fellow came back from it all on leave, and met a woman of his own kind who was moderately good-looking, and clean and kind and—and—willing, no wonder he wanted to grab her for keeps. The thing just got him that way. Natural, I think, and inevitable. Don't you?"

She nodded mechanically, without answering.

"It wasn't marriage they wanted. Couldn't have been marriage, as they couldn't possibly have seen beyond the next five or six days, and marriage carries a lot more obligations than that. Unfortunately. What they wanted was love. Sex love. Just to lose themselves in a woman and drown the nightmare of the thing they had to go back to. I don't blame them for that. I was one myself. Most of us were starving for affection. The lucky fellows who had their own women to come back to didn't need to go in off the deep-end with some other girl. They were all right.

"But the young bachelors got it in the neck. Ordinarily without any old war, they had their own arrangement for getting what they wanted out of life. When they came back on leave I haven't the least doubt they could still get it. More than ever. But they had changed. The war had changed them. They were momentarily unbalanced. The girl of the moment—as they might have regarded her at other times—became the girl they must get married to by hook or crook. Easy to understand—if you've been through it. I think, too, that something else besides sex hunger had a finger in the pie. One wanted to know, when one went back, that a girl

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

still remained here, sort of tying one up to old Blighty, giving one a root in the damned place one was fighting for. Am I boring you?"

"Please, David!"

He went on, his fingers still playing with her hair:

"Probably won't ever bother you with this again, so I might as well get it off my chest now. Undoubtedly that had something to do with it, but the dominant hunger was a sex affair pure and simple. Anyway, it kept the old order of matrimony flourishing. The holy state got a few recruits that most certainly it would never have had but for the war. Good old war!"

"My crash came in '16, Fay, just after the Somme. Got home fed up with things, battered about a bit, and just fit to weep if anyone was the least bit human to me. It got you that way sometimes. Exhaustion, I think. It always was a marvel to me that more men didn't go off their heads with the business. I had been back for a day or two, more or less at a loose end, and just taking in everything London had to offer, when I ran into one of our lot who had disappeared from the battalion about a month before. Blighty one. Good chap, and rather a favourite in the mess, so we hugged each other in the usual way and he insisted on my coming along to some kind of binge his people were fixing up for that night. I went gladly. I was longing for the companionship of other men and women.

"It was a bright 'do', and I met her there. To my eyes she looked just like the thing most of us had dreamed about. I fell right away; completely, absolutely. I knew nothing about her. That didn't matter. I knew I wanted her.

"Well, you know how quickly things could be done in those days. I wangled a little additional leave—I had a little 'pull' or something—and married her. I was quite crazy at the time. I have seen that often since,

but I'm not putting that forward as an excuse. It just was. I went in open-eyed, so anything that came to me afterwards was my own affair. It came all right."

He said the last words with a touch of bitterness. Fay did not look at him.

"I don't want to spill the whole messy affair at you, Fay. So I'll cut it short. But, anyway, I found I'd married the complete harlot."

"David!" It burst from her, shocked.

"Fact, Fay. While I felt bucked to think that she'd even let me touch her, I found out that she had been making practically a profession of living with officers on leave. I was the perfect goat who had imagined that love and marriage were necessary for what she had to offer. But even at that, I loved her. Or thought I did at that time.

"And I didn't see that the discovery, pretty ghastly as it was, need shatter things. I was sick at the thought, of course, but I tried to do what I thought was the right thing. I put it to her that the past was her own affair—just as my past was mine. I'm no plaster saint, and I wasn't then. Although the times made one feel more like pulling out one's revolver and putting an end to the thing, that seemed to me a silly way out. All I asked for was a square deal. As she had married me, why not start together, straight. I was willing. I had nothing to do with her past, but was prepared to carry out our contract for the future. I'd do my damndest to be a decent husband if she'd cut out the past and play the game. That seemed fair."

A piece of burning coal clattered into the fireplace. He leaned across her to pick it up with the tiny tongs and throw it back on the blaze.

"She agreed. Said it was over, and that it had all been a case of necessity. Money matters. I believed her, and went back to the front. And I went back trusting

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

her, not full of doubts at all. I really believed her. You see, she still seemed to my war-bleared eyes to be the perfect type of woman. I hadn't a moment's doubt about her.

"She let me down rather badly. I got back quite unexpectedly one night to find that not only had she carried on the good work all the time I was away, but that, not anticipating my arrival, she was even then about to entertain one of England's young heroes. That's all. Pretty messy story, and all that sort of thing, Fay, but there you are. I can't help it. It just happened."

She did not speak when he stopped, but sat leaning against him, her mind a wild confusion. He had talked quietly and unemotionally, and it was obvious to her that any hurt the thing had caused him had been buried deep years before. Its retelling had now no longer the power to wound him. He had put it away from him, a dim thing that happened long ago, hurting him then, but passing over him now. The retelling of it could never affect him again. She saw that. He could think about it in a detached way, as something belonging to another person's life. He had beaten it. But the sight of the woman, alive, beautiful, in front of him had overthrown his control and whirled him back into the past.

She sensed what he must have suffered. He had thrown out the story casually, jerkily, as he might have discussed an item in an evening paper. But behind it she could see the tragedy. She had known something of the war atmosphere from the woman's point of view, but she had been young and flapperish then. And she had been lucky. How lucky! She had come through without too many regrets. There flashed before her eyes a picture of Montgomery, the cold Scot with the sneering mouth. Where was *he* now? Playing out some peace-time tragedy that had begun during the war? How

easily, had he known, he might have been playing it with Fay.

How easily, indeed, she might have been engulfed a score of times! But she had come through it without harm. It was peace, with all its problems, that was hurting her; not war with all its recklessness. It was peace that, eight years after the rotten old war, delivered to her a man like David Musgrave. And David Musgrave had been captured by the other woman during the war.

"Why didn't you divorce her, David?" she asked abruptly.

"Difficult to explain. And yet, easy. I was sick of the thing. I never wanted to see her again. I never wanted to have anything to do with her. That didn't mean that we should be divorced. It just meant that I intended to get out of life. I hadn't the least desire to marry anyone else, so why bother?"

"But, David——"

"As far as we were concerned we were absolutely divorced. I never saw her again, in fact, until to-night. At the end of the war I took up the threads of my writing market and buzzed off to Paris. I was sick of London. It had given me a knock-out, so I turned my back on it."

She shivered slightly, and his arms slipped round her. They were warm and comforting.

"David, you could have got plenty of evidence."

"Too much! But I didn't need it. I had it all in my own mind and heart. I was judge, jury, and everything else, Fay."

She was thoughtful for a moment. "Darling, that doesn't make you free in the eyes of the world."

"It makes me free to myself. And that's all that counts."

He said it very deliberately, as if he knew what was passing through her mind. She realised she was battling

her woman's desire against some kind of perverse philosophy of life that this man had fashioned for himself as a result of his experience. He was going to be terribly difficult, but hope was taking possession of her as she sat silent between his knees; hope such as had not embraced her for a long time; and she could feel it revivifying her, steeling her for the encounter, quickening her brain.

She lifted her face to him, and obediently he lowered his head and kissed her. Her kiss was soft and sympathetic.

"What a hell you've been through, David," she whispered.

He laughed the memory off.

"It's all over now, Fay. Long ago."

"You're starting new again?"

"Starting? I started years ago, just after the war. I know where I stand with life, and just what I want out of it."

"You lucky man! What *do* you want out of it, David?"

He marshalled his desires in his mind. "Companionship. I think that comes first. The companionship of stimulating, honest people. Friends, in fact. And work. That comes next. Work is more necessary to a man than anything else, Fay. Does this sound like a lecture?"

"I asked for it. But I don't quite believe you. Don't you want money?"

"Fortunately, I have enough to see me through my brief sojourn on this earth. The fact that, in spite of this, I still enjoy working, always suggests to me that I was cut out for the preachers' heaven."

"And—love?"

He said gravely, "Fay, I'm a little doubtful about love. I don't just know what *you* mean by it."

"Surely, it's simple. Don't you want to have someone that you care for more than everybody else in the world; and someone who cares for you? Don't you want a woman who satisfies all those longings in you?"

He said playfully, "Are you suggesting that there's any one woman in the world who will do that for any one man—for as long as he lives?"

"But, of course, David."

"Then I know now not to take you seriously."

"David, don't you believe in love?"

"Of course I do."

"Then—?"

"What you're thinking about is marriage. A very different thing."

"But isn't it the same thing?"

"Not a bit. Love needn't have anything to do with marriage. Mostly it hasn't, once it has achieved its object."

She protested. "I don't understand you at all."

"I believe you do." He said it seriously, the banter going out of his voice. "I believe we understand each other very well, Fay."

She wondered whether he knew all that was passing through her mind as he said it. His eyes were very alert. His brain seemed to be as keen at this time in the morning as it had been hours before in the Gold Bug. This man, this unknown man, was bound to have watched the tactics of many women in his day. It was impossible that he did not know a part of her thoughts and hopes as she sat there with him. But how much did he know, and how much did he guess?

She knew from what she had seen of him that it was foolish to play the part of a young, unsophisticated girl. He would only laugh at her. There would have to be considerable frankness even in their warfare. Frankness was strategy. If she treated him as a man who

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

understood, and especially as a man who saw her position in life, she would not antagonise him. It would be much better to show her hand openly with a man like David Musgrave.

There was no point in provoking his suspicion by a pretence of simpering innocence. He would see through that at once. The understanding girl was infinitely the better role for her. And even understanding girls could be innocent girls! Circumstances sometimes frustrated their sympathetic understanding and forced on them a reluctant conventionality.

What were the circumstances in her case? Of course! Her father and mother. She wondered, as she thought of them, if ever subconsciously she had considered them in the situations similar to this that had arisen in her life before. Perhaps she had. She did not know. But with David, at least, they presented her with a reason for resistance.

Her father and mother! She'd do anything for a man she loved if only it wasn't for her father. Clergyman, you know. The old school. And mother. Break her heart if anything went wrong, if she got into a mess. Honestly. Would do anything. But. . . . As she sat, silent, she saw dimly the struggle that lay ahead.

"You see," David Musgrave said, and she knew he guessed something of her thoughts, "I don't think love and marriage need be necessarily separated things. I won't go as far as some people and say that the further they're kept apart the better for both, but it seems to me that one can love without having to marry."

"But, David, surely if you really loved a woman, you'd want to marry her?"

"I never mean to get married again."

She saw the determination in his face, and fought: "Oh, just because one woman let you down, doesn't say——"

"It doesn't say a thing! I agree. What one woman did has nothing whatever to do with that. I just know it. That's all."

"Not even if you loved?"

"But I have loved since I decided that. In fact, it's not a decision at all. It's just a knowledge—a conviction."

"You have loved?"

"Several times. Naturally." He reached up for the cigarettes, offered her one, and scratched a match to light it. "I'm only human."

She knew he would despise her if she pretended to be squeamish.

"But those were only affairs, David."

"So are the things that lead to most marriages—if you let them get as far as that."

"Surely there's a difference?"

"Not a bit, Fay. In the middle of any one of those—affairs, as you call them—I might easily have suggested marriage to the other person. And we might have been married. But then, in the usual time, the affair would have been over, and the marriage would still be on. A silly position to be in when the next affair started! The position of most married men!"

She suggested: "But haven't you just been doing the sort of thing that you wouldn't tolerate in your wife?"

"Only after we parted. I didn't before." He turned up her head and looked at her. "I say, I'm not altogether swine, you know."

"You sound very much like the usual man, David."

"I am the usual man, Fay. What on all the earth gave you the idea that I wasn't?"

"So you did that because your wife gave you a thin time?"

"Lord no! I have fallen in love from time to time because it comes naturally to me. If you're trying to

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

make a kind of mental revenge of my mode of life, a tasting of the dregs because I got one under the belt, you're altogether wrong. There was nothing so dramatic behind it. I live easily and simply, as a bachelor. As a bachelor, I'm convinced also that I'll never get married again. Not because of the sorrows of matrimony at all, but because I'm just naturally a bachelor. I realise that now."

"So you are quite happy?"

"Quite."

He puffed gently at his cigarette. She gazed moodily into the fire.

"You sound a little bit smug, David."

"That meant to taunt me? It doesn't. If knowing what you want out of life is being smug, then I am smug. I suppose doing what other people want you to do is being a real man?"

"And you're thoroughly selfish."

"That's just saying I'm smug, again. And I've admitted it."

"And you want to go on as you are now?"

"I *shall* go on as I am now."

She was conscious now that he understood fully the line of her thoughts. The slightest suggestion of steely determination had slipped into his pleasant voice. It was a subtle undertone, carefully soft-pedalled, unnoticeable to a girl who knew nothing, but a message of warning to the girl he presumed her to be, that she could make or kill their future friendship.

"Isn't that rather hard on the girl?" she asked, changing her tone to suggest that, as she was interested in his life, she wanted to see all sides of his attitude toward it.

"Just why, Fay?"

"Well, it must be awful to be turned down the moment a man hasn't any use for you."

"Is it any better to be regretfully tolerated? Surely not. That's what most married women have to put up with."

She said petulantly, knowing it was silly, "But why can't you go on loving?"

"Now you're asking me something that no human being can answer. Ask Nature. Ask God. But don't ask me why I can't control my emotions. To be able to do that would mean taking the whole uncertainty out of life."

"That wouldn't be such a bad thing! But what if the girl prefers marriage, David? It's pretty rotten to force her——"

"I told you before that I didn't believe in things without consent."

"Sorry. So you did. Well, that's fair enough."

She sat silent, without reason glancing at the tiny rectangular watch on her wrist. It was after four o'clock. The man saw the time at the same moment, but neither referred to it or made any movement.

The world outside lay asleep. That part of it that did the donkey-work for the others would soon be stirring, throwing off its bedclothes, going out, yawning, coughing, cursing, to meet the dawn. It was comfortable in front of the fire. She snuggled against the man's legs.

"I think it's an awfully wise scheme, David," she said generously.

"It isn't quite a scheme. It just happens that way."

"But tell me: What happens when you meet a girl who likes you but who wouldn't dream of doing anything outside marriage? Old fashioned, and all that sort of thing, but they still exist, you know."

"I do know. But I think you've got me wrong, Fay. I don't want you to get the idea that I fall in love with scores of girls. I don't. They've been remarkably few. You seem rather to suggest that I'm a Bluebeard going

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

about hunting for scalps. As a matter of fact, I'm a bit of a monk in my way."

"Sounds ominous. But go on: answer my question. You say you wouldn't dream of trying to force her?"

"Of course not. Her life's hers. Mine's mine. It's too bad if we want the same thing and have different ideas about how it could be secured. But there it is. One of us either comes to see that he's wrong and gives in to the other, or we just go our own roads."

"And so far you haven't seen you're wrong?"

"No."

"And the girl?"

"Honestly, Fay, I haven't been faced with the problem. And I hope never to be."

"What would you do if you were?"

"I can't possibly say. Circumstances—the girl most certainly, for instance—would be bound to have something to do with any particular case. At the moment, though I feel that my present ideas would remain unaltered."

"And if the girl's remained the same, you'd lose her. And she'd lose you?"

"Looks like it."

"And you wouldn't care?"

"How could I avoid it?"

"By caring! By wanting her so much that you'd give in to her and marry her."

"Fay, you're getting romantic!"

"Oh, hell, David, it's all so silly! What a damned attitude to have toward life!"

"Toward love," he corrected. "Not toward life."

"Same thing, isn't it?"

"Oh! You *are* romantic! Totally different things."

She said impatiently, "I can't see that. If one is such a big thing that it can make a terrible difference to the other, they *are* the same thing. What's life——"

"—without love? I thought you'd say that!"

"David, you're hopeless."

"Only from your point of view. From mine—the smug one, if you like—I'm full of hope. I enjoy life to the full."

"But you could make so much more of it!"

"Married to someone I didn't want?" he asked coldly.

They were silent again. She felt absurdly that he was winning. She had allowed him to show her enough of his position. It was time he realised something of the difficulties of her own.

"David," she said, almost in a whisper, "what would you do if a girl cared for you, and would love to do things without a thought of marriage; who didn't even believe in it herself, for that matter; but who couldn't possibly do them because of—things?"

"What sort of things?"

"Because she might hurt someone. Not herself. Not the man. But her father. Her mother."

"How could she do that?" Impatiently.

"Suppose her father was a clergyman. The old school. And her mother the wonderfully nice type that you get in country vicarages. And they were old-fashioned, but terribly sweet. And just too wonderful to be hurt."

"I say——"

"And she understood just how they looked at that kind of thing, and knew that it would kill them if she ever came a cropper?"

"How could she come a cropper?"

"Oh, you know. If something went wrong—it does, David; there's no use pretending it doesn't—and anything happened. If she had a baby."

"But, Fay, that's looking for the one in a thousand chance."

"But such a girl would have to face it, David. If

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

she knew that anything like that would crash her people, how could you expect her to go off the rails?"

"I wouldn't. Not on your life!"

"But what if you cared for the girl? If she cared for you? Rather a lot?"

"But there isn't such a girl. What's the use of supposing these damned silly things. I'm not in love with such a girl." His hands slipped down from her head over her breasts and tightened their grip as he spoke. "The only girl I can possibly have a thought for, if you must know, is a dear funny thing called Fay Sharon."

She could feel his breath on her neck as he strained her to him. She waited for a moment while he expected her response.

"David," she said quietly, "my father is a clergyman. My mother is just the darlingest thing in the world."

He took it well. His grip slackened slightly as he gathered the import of her message. Then it tightened again. She stroked the back of his hands with her palm. He forced a laugh, a little bark of a laugh, and said:

"You did that very well. Attack is certainly the best form of defence. You've spiked my guns before I was even ready to fire them, Fay. Jolly good tactics."

"And truth, too, David; not just tactics. I want you to believe that."

Again he turned her face up. "Honest Injun?"

"That wet, that dry! Word of honour, David! I want to be frank with you. Things can so easily be spoilt without frankness. I'm not a silly fool of a girl. I know life a bit, and know something of men too. Naturally. And I know we're going to be—are, in fact—great pals. I like you terribly."

"You're rather wonderful, Fay."

"And I'd love to do lots of ripping things with you. For myself I don't care a hang. I believe in living."

But I'm tied. It would make a fearful mess at home if things went wrong. You do understand, don't you?"

"I don't want to understand! I don't want to see anything that stands in the way of our doing the things we want."

"Neither do I, but I can't help it. There's your wife, too," she added thoughtfully.

"What has she to do with it?"

"Oh, I don't know." She turned away her head as if confused and a little ashamed at her own thoughts. "But it would be terrible knowing all the time that you belonged to someone else."

"I don't," he said hotly.

"In a way you do, David. It's no use saying you don't. You can't wipe out things like that. At least not for another woman. I'd feel it. All the time. It would spoil everything."

For the first time she felt him receptive. She had smashed the outer wall of his defence and was forcing him to see things through her eyes. She knew that when he answered:

"But that's just imagination, Fay. You might feel it at first, but I'd make things ripping so that you'd never feel it again. We could have a wonderful time together."

"You don't know how I'd love to! But it's impossible!"

"I'm hanged if I can see why."

"You don't know my father. Or my mother. They are totally ignorant of the world to-day, David. They know nothing about London life or modern people. They'd never dream that I'd even go out with a married man. If they knew that I was sitting here in your flat at half-past four in the morning they'd have a shock. They'd never guess that it could be entirely innocent."

"They need never know that it is or isn't!"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"I know. I know, darling. I can see your side," she protested. "I just want you to see mine and understand it. If anything went wrong, it would kill them. They'd never survive it. They think I'm absolutely all right."

The man gathered his forces together. "But, Fay, we're not in the middle ages."

"*They* are. Like lots of other people. If my father knew even that you were a married man he'd forbid me to see you."

"Oh, that's nonsense."

"Quite. But I can't alter it. It would be different if you were divorced, David."

He stormed quietly: "What possible difference is there between a divorced man and a man who hasn't lived with his wife for years?"

"None at all. I know. But they wouldn't see it like that. They'd have me back home in no time if they knew we were friendly like this. And you can't blame them, really. You know what silly messes some girls get into, and they're not to understand that you and I might be different."

"But we *are* different." His grip tightened again. "And that difference is our safety, Fay. Can't you see that? It's because you are you, and I am me, that we can have all the things in life that we want. We know life. We understand each other. Don't let's play the fool and throw it all away."

She said quickly, seemingly caught up with the idea anew, "I'd love to, David. You don't know how I long to, sometimes." She felt the fire running through him. "It's so natural to want to, isn't it? I can be awfully frank with you."

He whirled her completely round, putting her back to the fire. She was kneeling on the floor between his legs, and he pressed his knees against her sides as he talked rapidly, his eyes gleaming.

FAY AND DAVID

"Fay, let's stop all this fooling. Life's short and can be sweet. It's once in a lifetime that two people like you and me come together and understand each other. It's unfortunate that I've been married. I can see your side, and am willing to admit that. I wish to God it had never happened. I've wished it long before I met you. But things are as they are. Can't we accept them? It's good of you to think of your people like this, but frankly I think you exaggerate your fears. And anyway, Fay, your life is yours—not theirs."

"But I couldn't possibly harm them, darling. That's simply asking the impossible."

"It's asking the inevitable! You're this generation; they're another. If each generation lived in fear of what the last thought of it the world would never have moved. It would have died off centuries ago."

She said thoughtfully, "But there must be some in each generation, David, who, through family circumstances or something or other, can't do what they'd like to do."

"You're not going to be one."

"I'm afraid I have been, and will have to go on being."

Their eyes battled for a minute.

"But I wish it was otherwise, David," she added gently.

"Make it otherwise. It's up to you."

"Don't you think you put too much on to me?"

"How?"

"You want me to take the plunge. All the risk would be mine, and any of the consequences. And I'm to play ducks and drakes with my people. Isn't that a lot to ask?"

"Is it too much?"

"No. I'd do it willingly, my share of it. It's *them* I'm afraid of. I tell you, if they knew you were married I'd have to leave London to-morrow. If you were divorced——"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"That couldn't make any difference."

"At least it would give us a chance of being together without scandal getting to their ears. Surely you see that. Do see my side."

"I do."

"And even if nothing went wrong, there's always the chance of the thing coming out another way. Your wife may be looking for a divorce. She may want evidence."

"She could have had it before."

"Yes, but she might just pick on me. You never know, David. It would be terrible if that happened. You must see that I can't risk it."

Musgrave said, "There's not the least chance of that."

"You can't be sure. I couldn't risk it, David."

There was a suggestion of reluctant finality in her voice. He did not answer her, but looked moodily into her eyes. She gazed back frankly.

"You could make it all so easy," she whispered.

She could see by his eyes that he was playing with the idea, a new one to him. She knew he could come to want her, even more than he did now. There was between them that strange and yet common understanding that comes to many people who have known one another only a short time, destroying obstacles that other persons could not remove in a lifetime, invading secret corners of the heart without let or hindrance. He liked her. She liked him. They had acknowledged it almost at the beginning. Behind her manœuvring for her own security, there was a genuine desire for the man. Younger and less experienced, she might easily have surrendered to him. It was in her to do it. She wanted to give: but life had taught her not to give foolishly. If her head conquered her heart with David Musgrave it was not because he moved her less than any other man, but because she saw in him the possible fulfilment of her hopes.

FAY AND DAVID

And because she felt that the moment of decision was at hand she exerted herself to winning him. She drew herself closer to his body, as if needing protection. Her fingers caught his gently and caressed them.

"David!" she whispered. Her eyes were tender and moist with the strength of her emotion. Her lips parted in half eagerness for his kiss. Behind her the firelight caught her golden hair and flamed it with a hundred gleaming mysteries. In the shadow the bold lines of her face and body were softened. She was provokingly feminine, warmly desirable.

He caught her to him and kissed her full on the mouth. And, forgetting her play, she strained him to her. They clung together.

"Fay!" the man said tensely, shaken, "I love you."

"I love you, too, David."

"Fay!" He put the question into his eyes and did not speak it. But she knew the pleading behind them. Instinctively she wanted to acquiesce. But instead, she answered:

"You are going to make it easy, aren't you, David?"

She could read the whole story of his thoughts as she watched how he took it. For a moment he seemed about to embrace the idea. Just for a moment. Then she knew she had lost. The fire dimmed in his eyes. Slowly he relaxed his hold on her. He sighed wearily. She knew he was realising that he had almost been trapped into doing something he did not want to do. The thought was taking hold on him that she had been tricking him, a natural reaction on a strongly self-controlled man who had momentarily released his control.

There was danger in that, since he might suspect that she had played all the time and did not care for him at all. She broke in on his thoughts: "Is it so awfully difficult?"

"Is what I want you to do so awfully difficult?"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"It's easy, David. I'd love to. But I've told you why I can't. You haven't told me why you can't do the other thing."

"Oh, just because I believe in my own kind of life. And because I'm smug, I suppose. And selfish. And all the other things."

"And I'm not worth changing some of it for?"

He looked at his watch.

"I say," he exclaimed in surprise. "It's after five! It's too bad having kept you out of bed all this time, Fay."

"David!" There was anguish in her appeal.

"I'm awfully sorry. I hadn't realised it was so late. But I'll soon get you back to your Club from here."

He had retired behind his defences. She could feel the wall between them growing stronger every second. He was locking her outside, putting her away from him. Had he tried, and she knew he wasn't trying, he could not have broken down her resistance more effectively. As she felt herself losing him, her desire intensified. His mention of the Club, psychologically perfect had it been planned, beat down the last crumbling barrier of her strength.

"Darling," she said with a sob. "Don't be a brute. I do love you!"

But he was rising as she said it, and the appeal in the voice was lost to him. Or he may have imagined it was still part of her ensnaring.

"It's going to be cold in the taxi. Better wrap yourself well."

She stood up beside him, but he moved away to switch on the light, and then wandered back to her. She looked at him, her face bleakly pathetic, very like a child pleading for sympathy after a hurt. His eyes were friendly and cool. They met hers, but were no nearer than if

she had glimpsed them at the other end of a room. They looked through her, indifferent.

He was politely concerned about her :

"You shouldn't have let me keep you so late, Fay. You must be tired. Have a drink before you go!"

She stared at him miserably, without replying. Lucky man who could summon up this wall from nowhere. He had lost her in about half a minute. She meant absolutely nothing to him. The kisses that had burned them both were forgotten. The delightful nearness of him, the touch; it had never happened. The whole evening must have been a dream from which she would awaken in her bedroom in the Club. The Club. The cold, inhuman Club.

She summoned up a smile.

"No thanks, David. I think I've drunk too much for one night. Will you get me my cloak, please?"

He was crossing the floor, but stopped and turned back.

"There's a mirror and things in my bedroom, Fay, if you'd like to have a peep at yourself."

"Not much to look at, is there, David?"

He broke down his coldness to say: "Don't be the complete fathead. I'll get my things out of my room and leave you a little more space. It's rather tiny."

She followed him. He grabbed up his hat, scarf and coat while she stood looking in at the door.

"Make yourself at home. I'll put my things on out here."

He closed the door behind her. She looked round the room. It was very simply furnished. A bed—rather a big bed—a dressing-table, a very big wardrobe for such a small room, and a small table with a reading-lamp at the side of the bed. There were two or three books on it and she glanced at their titles. *The Dance of Life* by Havelock Ellis. *Notes on Democracy* by

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

H. L. Mencken. *The Spanish Farm* by R. H. Mottram. *The Return* by Walter de la Mare. *The Blue Duchess* by Paul Bourget.

"Varied," she thought.

There was a pad of writing paper also on the table, with some loose sheets covered with small, evenly-running writing. She gazed at the writing without reading.

"Lots of character. And few corrections. Knows what he wants to say. I know it!"

She turned to the mirror and looked at herself.

"Not too bad! But not good enough. So it is too bad!"

She did not powder, but reached for her cloak and pulled it around her.

"Well, good-bye, little bedroom. Nothing doing!"

A wave of depression seized her. She would never see this place again in all probability. At the door she turned back and her eye caught the writing pad on the table at the bed. She went over to it and ripped off the top sheet. Then she searched for a pencil. There was no sign of either pencil or pen and ink. She opened her little gold bag and pulled out her lip-stick.

"David," she scrawled in thick red letters across the page, "I do love you."

Then she let the page fall on to his pillow, put the stick back into her bag, pulled her cloak close to her slim boyish body, and went out to join him.

CHAPTER V

SOMETHING LIKE AN ULTIMATUM

FAY SHARON awoke at noon. Her room in the Georgian Club faced south, and a shaft of cold sunshine slipped past the flapping window blind and played on her face. She yawned, turned lazily on her back, and stared blankly at the white ceiling. She had got into bed at half-past five that morning, tired and disappointed, expecting to lie awake until breakfast, but had fallen into a sound sleep ten minutes after David Musgrave had shaken her hand at the Club door and gone back to his waiting taxi.

She could not remember dragging herself up the two flights of stairs, but she had a hazy recollection of Graves' face when he let her in. The hour was late and he had shown clearly that he thought she might have made a night of it. She remembered the expression on his face. It seemed silly to him to have given in at that hour when a little more endurance would have seen her into daylight.

She glanced at the table by her bedside. Her maid had come in, knowing nothing of her late arrival, and left a tray of breakfast things. That had been hours before. The pot of tea was stone cold. The toast was hard and unappetizing. A letter lay propped against the milk jug, but it was in her father's handwriting, and she left it unopened on the table and rang for her girl and had the tray removed. She upset the domestic arrangements of the Club by demanding her usual bath, and getting it, but she did not breakfast.

While she lay in the warm water she thought of David

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Musgrave and wondered how he had taken her message. He might telephone her. It was just possible. They had parted friends—rather cold friends, but still friends. And he must have gone back to bed—and to her lip-stick message. It was more than likely that sleep would soften him and that morning would find him eager to speak to her. But it was noon and he had not yet thought of it. If he had telephoned they would have come to her room and awakened her. Perhaps he, too, had slept late.

She made no plans for lunch. Lunch was on the lap of the gods, but she asked Graves to tell everybody who 'phoned her that she was not in the Club. Everybody, that is, except Mr Musgrave. She made a careful toilet, with an ear all the time to the approaching footsteps of the porter coming to tell her that Mr Musgrave was on the telephone.

The porter did not play his rôle. Mr Musgrave did not ring.

At last she read the letter from her father. It was full of the measured phrasing that usually moved her to impatience and laughter. But now she did not see any humour in it. Her face became thoughtful as she read it a second time. The Rev. Arthur Sharon came to the point quite quickly.

“And now I am afraid I have some unpleasant news for you. I need hardly say that I have postponed the writing of this letter until the last possible moment, hoping that circumstances might arise which would remove the necessity of my having to write it at all. I think I have always shown myself considerate to your wishes, and any action of mine which causes me to deprive you of something upon which you have set your heart is undertaken not lightly but after deep meditation and a most careful searching for possible alternatives.

SOMETHING LIKE AN ULTIMATUM

"For some time past it has been obvious to me that unless your earning capacity as an author increases, you will have to return home. I have gladly borne the weight of maintaining you in London, and would continue to do so if my private affairs permitted. Unfortunately, I have suffered a rather severe financial setback lately, and for some time at least, if not permanently, it will be necessary to nourish my resources.

"I shall be unable to pay for your Club accommodation and board, and I suggest that you might come home and do your writing here. You must by now have a fairly accurate idea of the market for which you are writing, and I cannot see that such an arrangement need be an inconvenient one.

"Besides, although this is a point which I would not allow to stand in your way, your mother and I would prefer you to be here with us. You would be much more comfortable here than in your Club.

"I hope your novel is now well on the way towards completion. . . ."

Fay Sharon began reading the letter a third time but stopped, folded it carefully, and put it out of sight. She was disturbed. It was ridiculous of her father to imagine that after London and the freedom of the Club, and the gay friends and merry nights, she could go back to the stodgy existence at the vicarage.

Her thoughts turned to the financial side of this annoying letter. It had never occurred to her that the stream of her monthly allowance might dry up, and as her authorship had only been an excuse for her gamble with life in London, it had not mattered that she failed to make an income out of it. She had never tried to make it a success. She had a certain amount of ability which, had it been trained and battered into shape, might have

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

served her well and provided her with an income of sorts. But it had been neglected in the life she had deliberately sought, and could not be resuscitated at this late date without much effort and sacrifice.

Her earning capacity as a writer was so small as to be ridiculous. As far as she knew she had no earning capacity in any other direction. For the first time she faced this fact and was disconcerted by its discovery. It was humiliating to find she was entirely dependent upon the kind-hearted but terribly old-fashioned father who didn't know a thing about life. She had always felt that she controlled her own destinies. She was her own mistress. Her father was pleasantly unobtrusive in his generosity by paying his cheques direct to her bank. She had never been compelled to write him the kind of letter that began: "Thanks so much for the usual allowance." He had spared her that, and she had prospered in dignity and a self-deception that was now revealed to her.

It was an unpleasant shock to be made conscious of her inability to earn anything which would help to maintain her in her life at the Club. She thought of her motor-driving experiences during the war. But few girls acted as chauffeurs now; and she knew nothing about a car except the driving of it. She couldn't do much else. True, she had once thought of the stage. . . .

At this point Fay decided that her fears had run away with her. She was becoming morbid. There was time to worry about the future when the present had been smoothed out. *It* would make the future. Besides, her father was probably exaggerating. She glanced at her watch and went down to the telephone box in the hall. There was no harm in seeing whether David Musgrave's name was in the directory. She was pleased when she saw it was. She did not want to ring him, knowing from some little experience and much Club gossip how men came to dislike women who bothered them in this way.

SOMETHING LIKE AN ULTIMATUM

But she confessed to herself that she wanted to hear his voice again.

Outside the box she lingered for a minute or two, telling herself that girls who telephoned men who had turned them down were seeking trouble. She recalled Club stories of misguided women who had shown too clearly and openly that they loved men. She could not recollect their exact fate, but knew that it was something disappointing, if not actually diabolic. Then she walked slowly away from the telephone.

As she walked quickly back to it, her mind made up, the thought came to her that she could easily wait until evening. In the meantime, Musgrave might make the first move, and she would not have revealed herself. She knew also, remembering the situation between them, that she was doing a foolish thing, but she was impelled by a desire to undo some of the damage she had been forced to work on their friendship the night before.

In a last moment's hesitation over the wisdom of her act, she tossed a penny to decide. It fell tail-side uppermost, indicating the reverse decision from the one she desired to make, so she tossed for the "odd one in three" and won her way.

She went into the box. The voice which answered from David's flat was a woman's.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," it said. "Mr Musgrave is not here."

"Oh." She had not anticipated that. "Who am I speaking to, please?"

"I'm Mrs Jones—the woman who looks after Mr Musgrave's flat when he's in London."

"Oh, yes, I see." She had forgotten that David was bound to have someone who cleaned up for him and did things. Probably the woman came in the mornings and made his breakfast too. He must have got up quite early after all. "Will Mr Musgrave be coming back soon?"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"He won't be coming back, ma'am. You just caught me before I went out myself. He won't be here until he comes back to London again next time."

"Back to London. Next time! Has he left town?"

"He's gone to Paris. He flew from Croydon at noon to-day. Or at least that's where he left for."

"I see."

"Very unexpected it was, ma'am. I thought he was here for some time this time."

"Yes, it's rather surprising. Had he a telegram or anything calling him over?"

"Not that I know of." The voice became garrulously informative. "He was packing when I came in this morning and then he made all the arrangements by telephone. I *was* surprised, as he had just said to me the day before yesterday—no, it was Tuesday——"

Fay cut it short. "Did he look as if he had had news of any kind?"

"Now that you mention it, he was a bit sad-like."

"And he didn't leave any message, I suppose?"

"Not one, as far as I know."

"I see. Thank you so much."

She hummed a tune and went out to the hall again. Disconcertingly lonely, she sought out and had lunch with Paddy Raine. It was the first time she had ever done that with a member of the Club, but the previous evening had bracketted her with Paddy Raine, and to Paddy she turned naturally for company. The younger girl talked eagerly of their evening, describing her later adventures at the Forty-Three Club with great animation. She had got into bed at five o'clock, and had risen as usual at eight, bathed, breakfasted, prepared to go off to her office, and then in a mood of recklessness telephoned her "boss" that she was unwell, and was afraid she would be unable to do any work. She had then gone back to bed and stolen two more hours' sleep.

SOMETHING LIKE AN ULTIMATUM

Fay listened to the recital and simulated an interest in the adventures, but she found it difficult to give her whole attention. Her gaze wandered about the dining-room, noting features of its furnishing that deepened the feeling of growing pessimism in her. Only a few girls were lunching. One had brought a man in. He was the one male in the room, and was obviously and nervously conscious of the interest being taken in him by the girls at other tables. The girl with him was talking loudly and laughing too much. The sound made Fay gloomily cynical.

Restless, she took Paddy with her after lunch for a walk in the park. It was cold but sunny, the kind of healthy day that comes often to London. They lingered at the Round Pond and later listened amusedly to children's questions at the Peter Pan statue. The outing pleased Paddy. It took place at a time when she was usually typing letters . . . "confirming our telephone conversation of this morning . . ."; and it marked definitely the acceptance of her as a friend by Fay Sharon. Fay enjoyed her prattle, and gave it particular attention when the purr of an aeroplane high overhead tried to take her thoughts elsewhere. She was refusing to think about things. Somewhere in her brain there was a little lift-man who closed the door to all the graver thoughts that wanted to come up and discuss important matters with her. They could wait. For the present she lived in the present.

The afternoon with Paddy did not bore her. She enjoyed it, but with a queer detachment as if she were merely the recorder of the enjoyment for another person. She was in the park, and yet miles away from it. She had the feeling that this sunny day was a lull, a quiet passage between the doors of two experiences. Once when she allowed her imagination to become active, the aeroplane humming overhead stood for a symbol.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

It throbbed its way into her consciousness, and she looked up and was aware of its entreaty. But she shook off the mood, and suggested tea.

When they went back to the Club there was a message that Dick Webster had telephoned her. She rang him up, remembering as she fingered the receiver that the night before she had thought she might not see him again, and agreed to have dinner with him. Then she wandered into the lounge where a few girls were still at tea, and picked up a magazine and joined a small group at the crackling fire.

She pretended to be deep in the magazine, but now and again the conversation interested her, and she listened attentively. The talk was on the usual lines, being concerned, at the moment of Fay's arrival, with the increasing number of young boys who were to be seen at many dance places accompanying elderly women. From there, most logically, it developed into a questionnaire on the length of active sex life of the average female, about which there was a general and surprising revelation of ignorance; and then somewhat disappointingly it lapsed into a desultory discussion on the relative merits of the various shoe repairers in the district. But shoes became dance shoes, and dancing brought men to the fore again. Men, it was agreed, had gone "right off". They weren't what once they had been. If a girl just had dinner with one, and went to a dance with him, she was expected to do lots of other interesting things. They—those men—were always looking for what they could get, and they hadn't an ounce of disinterested decency in them. A decent girl couldn't really go out . . . and so on. Fay resumed her reading.

As she dressed for her dinner with Dicky Webster she thought more of the lounge and the Club and the girls than she did usually. Perhaps it was natural, being segregated in this way, that they should have a sugges-

SOMETHING LIKE AN ULTIMATUM

tion of sex obsession about them. They had not, really. But they were thrown on each other so much . . . women, women, women . . . that men naturally figured more in their thoughts than was perhaps good for them. She knew that in men's clubs, and places where men were in each other's company all the time they also were unduly interested in the opposite sex. But it was a pity about the girls. Some of the younger ones were getting ideas of men and life that were almost hopelessly silly. Experience had taught Fay that. But without experience and relying on other people's lop-sided views, those girls had life all out of focus before they had started living it.

That evening she was tender toward Dicky Webster. He had always been the decent, adoring boy. In his car on the way back to the Club she let him kiss her for the first time. He remained the same boy after it that he had been before. She had known he would be, and she was glad. It was in her, as in most women, to be annoyed at such a phenomenon, but she felt differently with this boy. She knew she thrilled him, and that she could make him very unhappy or very happy. The mood was on her to be kind to him.

He pleaded with her to be allowed to take her somewhere after dinner, but she put him off gently, conscious that decision of some sort was to be made soon in connection with the letter in her father's writing that waited in her room. She had avoided it all day, but she could not put it off indefinitely. So she insisted on his taking her back to the Club early, and enjoyed his rueful expression when he obediently carried out her wishes. It was cheering to have someone do what she wanted, even if it were only a boy of eighteen.

She put in the rest of the evening in her room, deep in an unusual preoccupation. Her position was difficult. If David Musgrave had stayed on in town there was just

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

the chance that she might have persuaded him to see the future through her eyes; a small chance, she conceded, but a sporting one. But Musgrave had gone, fled to Paris, obviously not caring what happened to the future. He was not sufficiently interested in her to jeopardise his bachelor-like independence. Had he stayed, she could have postponed writing to her father, or put him off with some excuse, and spent what might have been her last week or two in London in a manner befitting the occasion. As it was, she would have to make her ineffective exit to very slow music.

She did not see how it could be avoided. She was entirely dependent on her father. If he cared to ask her to return home, either because of financial necessity or through personal ill-humour, the wish must be regarded as an insistence. She could not refuse him. He held the key to the gateway of her freedom, and the key was his bank balance. She had little money of her own. Her father was certainly not a wealthy man, but he had always been able to give his family most of the things they wanted out of life. They had lived comfortably. Fay had been brought up in an atmosphere of plenty; and, never having to devise means of fending for herself, was correspondingly incapable of doing it.

Her efforts at writing had been prompted by a desire to pass time; to win a cheap, newspaper imitation of fame; to give her the right to fraternise with a vague unknown band of people called Bohemians. She had never been driven by the merciless urge of creative instinct, or tortured by the necessity of giving expression to something in her that was beautiful, or sad, or gay or dreamy or tragically moving. She had dabbled, and dabbled skilfully because she was intelligent; but writing had been only a hobby, not a scourging necessity, and she had dropped it easily when the moment threw up more engaging pursuits. She had used it as a means to an end.

SOMETHING LIKE AN ULTIMATUM

It had brought her to London, and to all the attractive men she wanted to meet, and now she was facing the fact that its neglect might take her away from what it had given.

The alternative to returning home was to stay on in London and support herself. The alternative was more easily seen than the method of its fulfilment. She saw what she had to do to avoid going home, but unfortunately she did not know how to do it. Once more she thought of the stage, falling into that easy belief of many girls that an attractive appearance is the sole requisite of an actress or chorus girl. One or two of the girls in the Club were chorus girls. She thought of them, and remembered some of the stories they told, and the idea grew less alluring.

She went down later and telephoned Tom. It was Friday night, and she suggested that he should go home with her on the following day for the week-end. He wanted to know in God's name why, and she told him. It was the first he had heard of the news, but then Tom supported himself by his work and was independent, so there was no reason why he should have been brought into the affair before. At once he was sympathetic. He was a friend rather than a brother, and he agreed to accompany her if he could make the necessary arrangements in his office. "You'll need my support," he said breezily. "Don't you worry!"

There was one more telephone call for her before she went to bed. It was from Ronnie Anton, and she smiled as Graves mentioned the name. He had evidently repented. The mood had passed, and he was willing to go on hoping. Too bad to keep him in suspense! She told Graves she was out, definitely out; out dancing or dining or drinking, or anything he liked, but *out*! He nodded his understanding and went off with the message. Fay went back to her room, slid into bed, pulled up the hot

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

water bottle so that she could cuddle it against her, and was asleep in a minute. A truant thought of David Musgrave tried to intrude itself, but she thrust it out triumphantly, and not even in her fragmentary dreams was he allowed to come to her.

But she dreamt instead of her father, a very menacing, threatening father whom she had difficulty in recognising at first, and who only revealed his identity when he turned up his blue eyes as if appealing for heaven's blessing on his brutality. He was standing over her with a whip, his face heavy with a savage scowl, very much like the figure of a ridiculously cruel father she had once seen on the posters of a travelling melodrama. So vivid was the impression, that she awoke with in still before her in the morning.

CHAPTER VI

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

(i)

THE ugly dream still haunted her in the afternoon as she sat in the train on the homeward journey with Tom, and even his laughter when she told him about it did not altogether take it from her.

When they got to the house she was almost afraid to go through the gate at the foot of the garden path and go in to meet the dream's original. She hesitated for a moment, and while she hesitated the front door opened and the Rev. Arthur Sharon stood in the porch. His eyes lighted with glad surprise, and so different was he from the caricature which midnight had pictured for her, that she flushed suddenly with warm relief and went quickly up the path and kissed him.

She noticed instantly that he looked older and weaker; noticed it sympathetically and yet resentfully, for she knew she would have to oppose some of his wishes, and any weakness or frailty in him that aroused her consideration was a weapon against herself. His hair, too, was whiter. He was ageing. He did not look a bit brutal. He was almost sheepishly mild and rather embarrassed indeed at the sight of both his children swooping down together on him with their air of city assurance. They did not often come back to the nest, and he had seen little of either (more of Tom than of Fay) during the year.

His blue eyes moistened, and he pulled out a large white handkerchief and blew his nose noisily.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Foolish old father," Fay murmured, her arm through his. "We're not worth blubbing over."

"You speak for yourself—as usual," Tom retorted. "I'm most certainly worth blubbing over. Where's mater?"

She appeared before he finished speaking, but she did not need the large white handkerchief. She understood her children better than did their father, and she was dry-eyed, but welcomingly tender, as she kissed them.

Always the mother, she thought of them first: "Tea's just ready. You must be cold after your journey. Come in to the fire and get warm."

"I wish it were Spring," their father said absent-mindedly, "I don't like these cold days."

"Spring in the country is better than in town," Tom whispered vindictively to Fay, pinching her arm as they went in.

She did not reply. She was surprised at her home and at herself. The house seemed different—agreeably different. Used to think of it as a prison from which she had contrived to escape, it was pleasant to find it slightly out of focus to her imaginings. There was a strange atmosphere of comfort which baffled her until she remembered the Club lounge and the cheerless bedrooms.

This place, this oddly familiar place of her childhood and girlhood, had an air; the air of a friend who surprises you by growing handsome on a long absence. It was quietly sure of itself. In every room there was a sleepy subtle spell; a drowsy contentment; a satisfying solemnness. The heart-beat of the place had been entrusted to the old grandfather clock in the hall. It stood sentry over the household, regulating its smooth and ordered life with a monotonous tick-tock, tick-tock. It was amazingly quiet. No heavy buses or honking taxis whirled past the windows. Sound had been muffled

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

and defeated. Her parents talked softly, pleasingly. Their voices lingered in the ear like distant music. She caught herself waiting, when one had said something, for the harsh, flat jeering reply she had grown used to. When it did not come there was a momentary shock. They said simple, kindly things, and she looked at them almost in mistrust.

Gradually, as she sat warming herself in front of the fire, with tea in her hand, and the cream cake that had once been her favourite tempting her again on a plate, she adjusted herself to the house. Its novelty wore off, and although it did not quite assume the character of the familiar background from which she had fled, its striking new features became less sharply etched. Tea was not over before she was capable of criticising some of them. She deliberately sought such a mood in order to strengthen her forces. She saw that she would need it, so seductively charming was the house, her father, her mother—even Tom, who seemed to be their accomplice, and not hers.

Surprisingly, because she had expected her father to evade the subject and bring it before her eventually as a problem to be discussed in his study after dinner, he took the conversation round to the news in his letter during tea, mentioning it almost casually but with an air of regret that suggested the last word had been spoken, and that Fay had merely come down to make the preparations for her ultimate withdrawal from London.

"I hope it didn't upset you too much, Fay. I kept putting it off and putting it off, believing that in some way I could save you the shock, but finally I had to write. As far as I can see, I shall have to cut down expenses as much as possible."

She stabbed the cake with her fork.

"I was sorry to hear about your difficulties, father."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

She called him father when she was feeling nice toward him; when she wanted to annoy him she called him Arthur, a trick she had perpetrated on her first visit home after going up to town, shocking the whole household. "I hope you're not too badly hit."

"Father's lost more than he makes out, Fay," her mother said, knowing from the set of her daughter's face that a struggle was coming. "He makes little of it, to ease our fears, but I happen to know he's involved more than he cares to admit."

"Tut, tut, not at all," Arthur Sharon said, embarrassed at his wife's interruption. "I admit I've lost more than I really bargained for, but it need not affect us unduly. An economy here and there, a temporary tightening-up and we'll weather it all right. Don't alarm them, Susan."

"You couldn't do that if you tried," Tom said cheerfully. "We absolutely refuse to be alarmed. After all, if the worst comes to the worst, I might be able to get a story or two for my paper while we're all pottering around the workhouse. Quite a good place for copy. We're all right, mother. Fay and I can look after ourselves. But just how badly off are we?"

It was the first time in Fay's memory that they had ever sat in at a family council. Her father, shyly secretive, a little afraid of his children's frankness, had always discussed things with his wife, never with Fay and Tom. In money matters, as in sex matters and all other matters, he regarded his boy and girl as children. In his eyes they had never grown up, never become a man and a woman in whom one might confide, and from whom one might draw comfort or even inspiration. He had always been the parent and never the pal, and he would have been dumbfounded if you had sympathised with him over it. It was strange now to hear him discuss things about whose existence they were supposed to know

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

nothing; but it was as well that he regarded them as innocents, or he would have been shocked at Tom's inward thoughts as he listened to the recital of his father's attempt to avoid the crash.

"But I could have told you weeks ago that these shares would flop," his son said, almost in exasperation, when the tale was told. "Why on all the earth didn't you let me know?"

"*You* could have told me?" his father exclaimed in surprise; and even their mother, who ought to have known better, turned and gazed at Tom. "But I wasn't aware that you knew anything about them, Tom."

"Father, there's nothing on the face of the earth that newspaper men can't find out about. Surely I've told you that before. If I hadn't known about these particular shares, I could soon have found out, but it so happens I did know. The one thing I didn't though, was that you were involved. If I'd thought——" He was going to say, "that you were such an idiot as to have faith in them," but closed his mouth on the words and sat silent, musing on the foolishness of some of the older generation who criticised the young.

Fay finished her cake and, looking for a place to put down her plate, let Tom take it away from her. She had listened without making any comments. She knew little of money, except that she always seemed to need more than she had, but she readily grasped that her father had been hit quite badly.

"I think it's a topping idea of yours that I should do my work here, father," she said, and her mother jerked round a suspicious head. "And I could do with a holiday from town, too."

"Splendid!" There was relief in his face. "I hoped it wouldn't be asking too much of you, Fay."

"But it's going to be awfully difficult."

"Oh?"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

She stretched out her long legs before the fire, and Tom eyed them appraisingly. There was a thoughtful pucker on her forehead.

"You see, quite frankly, I've not really worked up as big a market as I'd like before retiring to the country to write for it. It takes longer than you'd believe."

"But you've been four years, Fay. Surely in that time you've learned everything you want to know for your profession."

Tom put in loyally, "Takes longer than that usually. There's a fellow who gets things in our paper occasionally—fairly well-known, too—who's been at the job for years and hasn't made anything out of it to speak of."

"But you get lots of things accepted, Fay, don't you?" her father said.

"You promised to send us copies of everything you had printed," her mother murmured. "And we've only had three stories."

Fay thought: "So I kept my promise!" but said aloud: "Is that all? Why, surely, some have gone astray!"

"There's sometimes such a long period of delay between manuscripts being accepted and printed," Tom said helpfully, meeting her eyes. "I once heard of a chap who sold a story to a magazine, and, ten years later, reading a yarn in the same magazine, was astonished to find that somebody had plagiarised his old story. In the act of writing to the editor about it, he glanced at the title page to discover the culprit and found his own name. It was *his* story. They'd taken all that time to print it."

"I haven't heard that one," Fay said.

"Oh, it's quite true. Funnier thing was the sequel. Another ten years passed, the chap fell on evil days—like all writers—and started drawing the old age pension. Along came a cheque in payment for the old, old story,

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

and, counting as earned income, deprived him of his pension. Sad, wasn't it?"

"It may not all be true, father," Fay said, "but it's a fairly good indication of what happens."

She lapsed into silence, the next move being left with him.

"But I cannot see," he ventured, "that that sort of thing affects you, Fay. It really does not matter how long you have to wait till your stories are printed, or how long until they are paid for, if you are living and working here at home. Some such arrangement is, I am afraid, absolutely necessary; the more so, in fact, if there is such delay as Tom says. If you could maintain yourself in London the position might be different, but if you can't, I can hardly see you staying at that Club waiting and waiting and waiting for cheques."

"Besides, look at the comfort," her mother reminded. She thought: "And the deadness!"

Tom suggested, "Might not Fay be able to carry on in town with a smaller allowance, father?"

The tea things were being cleared away, and he waited until the door had closed behind the maid before he answered.

"It would be very small, Tom, and hardly enough to cover the Club upkeep with enough over for herself to be comfortable. That's why I suggested she should come back here. What she could save on the Club she could have for herself as an allowance."

Fay said quickly, "Then if I could earn enough to keep myself at the Club, there would still be a small allowance?"

"Oh, yes," and added sadly: "You're very keen on the Club, Fay."

"Not the Club in preference to this," she said quickly and contritely, "but only what it stands for, father. It means London, you know, and that means a more in-

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

teresting and varied life than the one I could live here."

"And, in writing, that's everything," Tom finished.

"I'd much prefer this." She looked round without feeling too hypocritical, and sighed happily. This comfortable place did grow on one.

"We'd love to have you back," her mother whispered. "You look awfully nice in this room, Fay."

They laughed.

"That's one way of getting her!" Tom said. "Now, what about it, Freak? Can you earn enough in town to pay for the Club?"

She looked him squarely in the face. "I can have a jolly good shot at it, anyway."

He was disappointed and showed it. "That's hardly good enough, Fay. You've got to be certain you can."

"Tom!" Was he deserting her?

"Of course you have! Can't you see that? It's no good your saying you'll have a shot at it. That means it'll be some time before you find out; and, if you fail, it's father that's got to pay for the luxury of the experiment—which he can't afford. You must see that. You can't take the thing on if there's no chance of your making good. It wouldn't be fair."

So he was deserting her!

"You must know now whether you can make enough or not," he went on, his eyes on hers. "You ought to be able to answer that easily."

She could. Too easily. Her brother knew she amused herself and that she more or less played with life, but he thought she worked *sometimes*. He had evidently some odd idea in his head that she could make enough money to pay her way at the Club. It was most laughable. And yet why was it laughable? Why shouldn't she be able to earn money? Other girls—thousands of them—less attractive, less intelligent, had little difficulty. Why shouldn't she?

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

He got up and came over to her, and, sitting on the low arm of her chair, slipped his arm round her shoulders.

"What about it, Fay?"

By clever lying she could still get her chance of "having a shot at it," but she hesitated. It was brutal of Tom to have pointed out that this would mean her father having to pay for any failure on her part. If only he had kept silent about that, she might have felt less guilty in answering confidently that she could easily earn enough to pay for her board at the Club.

"I'm awfully bad at arithmetic," she said weakly.

Her father and mother laughed, but Tom, who saw her expression said: "I'm not so bad. Couldn't I help you with it?"

In her mind he had now definitely become an antagonist.

"With my arithmetic?" she asked.

"Why not with the actual money?" he suggested quietly.

She looked up quickly. His eyes showed that he meant it.

"I suppose you know you're a darling!" she said, a little throatily.

"Well, look who's brother I am!" and laughed.

His father said, "That's a wonderfully generous offer, Tom. Do you mean that on the weeks when Fay is temporarily out of pocket in her earnings you'll lend her some money?"

"Why only lend?" He swung round. "She can have it for keeps if she feels like it. I get enough to keep me going very well."

"And it would only be once in a while, Fay," her mother said.

The words dashed the hope that had sprung up in her. She knew the money would be required oftener than that, and she had no right to take money from her brother

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

which she would in all probability be unable to return. Experience had taught her that London was an expensive place; Tom must have need of every penny he earned. He could find plenty of ways to spend his income, and if she started drawing on it there would be little left over to him for any luxury he wanted for himself. Oddly, the thought of Paddy Raine flashed into her brain.

She touched his arm affectionately.

"I'll tell you after dinner," she said briefly, "when I've had time to think it over, and improve my arithmetic. In the meantime, what's all the news about the old place?"

That gave her and Tom an opportunity to sit silent for a while, coming into the talk at intervals with surprised "Oh, really's!" and incredulous "Is that so's? How extraordinary!" While their parents plied them with the gossip of local affairs.

It gave Fay an opportunity also of doing some solid thinking. She knew that, whatever she did, she could not accept Tom's offer, and her failure to point this out to him immediately was merely her way of gaining time so that she might find an alternative way out. She would talk with him privately later. It must be that in newspaper offices there was some sort of opening for a girl of intelligence who could write. Why shouldn't she take up her work seriously for a change? A little late, of course, but surely not too late. She was out of luck with men; she might have more success with work.

The evening passed slowly. Dinner was a desultory affair of homely food and little conversation. Fay still played with her problem; Tom was unusually silent; their father, thinking already of the sermon he was shortly to polish up in the quietness of his study, was absent-minded; and their mother played her customary rôle of listener, stepping only outside it to urge them to eat a

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

good dinner and "keep up their strength." The atmosphere that had formerly seemed soothing was now only boring. Heavily boring. It depressed Fay and cramped the style of her brother. In the easy gaiety of town he was sure of himself and his high spirits; in the quietness of their home, laughter and the causes from which it springs began to take on the garb of sacrilege.

"I'd give a lot to let myself go," he whispered to her as they rose from the table, and she nodded in understanding.

"Why not tell them about the Forty-Three?" she suggested, and he had the decency to look thoroughly shocked.

In the train on their journey down she had finished the book which she had brought from the Club, and she looked round in search of something to read. Tom joined her in the hunt.

"You can't get better than the Bröntes," their father advised. "Or Jane Austin. Excellent. As good to-day as ever."

"Now I know why the church has lost the people," Tom whispered, his head close to hers at the book-shelves. "I suppose you and I are both damned, Freak. Well, I'm in good company, aren't I?"

"You're very nice to me to-night, darling. Nothing wrong with you, is there?"

He kissed her playfully on the back of the neck and handed her a copy of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

"For a good girl!"

They talked together when their father had retired to his study, and Fay was a little franker than she had ever been with Tom, letting him into some of the secrets of her earnings as she suggested to him that there might be something for her to do on his newspaper. He was dubious, but promised to see what he could do when they got back to town, and it was agreed that the question of

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

his offer should not come up again until he had seen just what hope there was. He was disturbed over the revelation of her slacking, and made a few biting remarks. Then, repenting, was helpful with all kinds of suggestions. There was a general move for bed at ten o'clock, but they were alone at the fire for some time after that, it being conceded by their parents that the hour was perhaps a trifle early for young people from London. In spite of the privilege, they found themselves drowsily tired, and half an hour later they were parting at their bedroom doors.

"I'd be like this all the time if I lived here again," Fay prophesied gloomily. "I'm positive I'd grow into a cabbage or some kind of vegetable. It's awful, isn't it?"

"Well, London doesn't appear to have inspired you to great work," he reminded her, and she put her fingers to her nose at him and closed her door.

(ii)

But it was Sunday's experiences that definitely decided Fay Sharon that life in the vicarage, whatever the alternative, was not for her. It was a gloriously sunny Sunday, too: a day when, had she been in town, she would have had the choice of two or three of her friends' cars. The tang of winter in the air supplied that touch of keen coldness which stirs in youth a desire for vigorous, active life. It was probably the worst kind of day she could have chosen for the soberly quiet routine of the vicarage's Sunday. At every turn comparisons were thrust upon her. Tom woke her early and insisted on her going for a short walk with him before breakfast. They went to church in the morning, and it was the first time she had been in a church since her previous visit home. Afterwards they stood and talked to people—nice

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

friendly, honest-looking people, in whom she had not the faintest interest.

She met men whom once she had regarded critically as possible mates, and was glad to see the look of admiration rise in their eyes, but she could summon up no feeling of warm friendliness for them, and no concern about them other than the usual politely expressed concern that is no concern at all. She was aware, as they were aware, that it was something in herself that was lacking, or some quality—like a peevish selfishness—that had been slightly over-developed; but she made no effort to overcome her deficiency, quietly accepting both its effects and its causes. She had always realised that to the people who saw only the effects she must appear an attractive woman with a strange unattractiveness.

Lunch was an unimaginative affair. The vulgar little doctor with the silly, bird-like wife was there. His frank, country humour always appalled her. Several times he failed hopelessly as a thought reader by remarking that Fay must be loving the quiet of the country after the rush of town. Taking unfair advantage of his professional position, he criticised her appearance, urged her to prolong her visit, and facetiously wound up his speil with the unnecessary and unpardonable advice that the best doctor in the country was Doctor Marriage. Fay looked at him stonily. It was one thing, in a West End night club, to say, "Darling, it's a man you need!" It was a totally different matter coming from this man in her father's vicarage.

The day dragged on. There were other people to tea in the afternoon, but in the evening the family was alone at dinner. Her mother asked her to stay longer, but Fay outlined her plans, and told them she was going to try to come to an arrangement with Tom's newspaper, and that by the end of the week she might be in a position to let her father know definitely whether she could afford

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

to continue living in town or would be returning home. They chatted together after dinner, but Tom and Fay were catching a train in the morning and it gave them an opportunity of agreeing to the suggestion of an early retiral. Fay found herself very tired. She had forgotten that to a person like herself a quiet week-end in the country can be an unnatural strain.

Her father showed his disappointment that she was going away again, and she was sorry for him. She was sorry for herself. Weariness burdened her this last evening with a touch of melancholy, and she regretted that she was such a misfit, that she saw life so differently from this placid, white-haired old man who was her father, and this kind-hearted woman who had brought her into the world. But more and more she was convinced that they were something apart from her, that she was theirs but did not belong to them. They did not understand her; they knew nothing of her desires and discontents, of her moods and tempers and her gnawing restlessness.

Or did they understand? Perhaps they did. She had never thought of that, always regarding them as beyond the horizon of her dreams. But they were wonderfully sympathetic. Now that she thought of it, they had gone out of their way many times to give her the crazy things she wanted. Perhaps they did understand. She was touched by the simplicity of their life, the futile simplicity it seemed to her who had not been lucky enough to achieve it.

They were natural and unaffected, asking little in a greedy world. They probably regarded her now and then as a selfish girl, ungrateful for all they had done. She must seem so to them. But, no; not if they understood.

But did one ever understand any one other person in this hopeless life? With all the similar experiences that

A HOME IN THE COUNTRY

were being lived by millions of people—the same dreams, the same loves, the same hatreds and jealousies and griefs and damning disappointments; the same poverty and wealth and work and play; the same days with their sunshine or rain, the same nights with their passions or playings, the same houses and clothes and cars and books and plays, the same everything—surely it was beyond understanding that in a world of sameness individual souls could create impassable barriers around themselves.

She left her bedroom and went downstairs for a book. The house was quiet. There was a dull red glow in the dying fire. The sentry in the hall, with his solemn, kindly tick-tock, tick-tock, stood guard over a house asleep. Her sleeping father and mother and Tom. She felt a sudden surge of emotion, and pressed the book hard against her breast.

CHAPTER VII

DAVID HAS AN IDEA

SHE was entirely unprepared for David Musgrave's telephone call three days later. She had come back from her interview with Tom's news-editor full of hope and confidence, with a new resolution taking hold of her. At the actual moment of his call she was thinking less of Musgrave than she had done since the night they parted. But Graves's mention of his name sent her eagerly to the receiver.

"Just got back to town," he said. His voice sounded gay over a telephone. "Are you doing anything for lunch?"

She lied quickly, "I've got something sort of half fixed up, but I can break it, I think."

"Don't bother if it's any trouble, Fay."

Damn him! He was good at the game.

"I think I can arrange it easily, David."

"I'm glad. I'd like to see you."

"I'd like to see *you*. I've got all kinds of news for you."

"Good or bad?"

"Well, I think I'm going to do some newspaper work."

"Oh? That sounds interesting. Do come and tell me about it. Where'd you like to go?"

She was disappointed that he made no mention of her lip-stick message, but she was prepared for that. His previous silence seemed definitely to have closed the affair. But he was evidently willing to be friendly. Half an hour later she met him at the Ivy, and was glad to see the light in his brown eyes as he shook her hand.

DAVID HAS AN IDEA

"You look fit, Fay."

"Ah, that's what a quiet week-end in the country does, David. You should try it instead of rushing all over the globe."

"Good advice, but I can't follow it. I'm off again to Paris in two or three days. Just slipped over to fix up some business with my publishers that I forgot last week."

He looked well in daylight; they both looked well, in fact, being the kind of tall, attractive people who make what gossipers call admiringly "a fine couple." His keen eyes quietly appraised her, and she responded to their admiration. She was in excellent spirits, the unexpected sight of him stimulating her.

"I think I should cut out B.G.'s," she said, when he suggested cocktails. "I'm a worker of the world now, and it doesn't do to have expensive, cocktail tastes any longer."

"Tell me about it," he urged.

"You haven't seen Tom, then?"

"No. Is he connected with it also?"

"He's the darling who's more or less got me a chance to work on his paper."

"A job?"

"Well, it takes some explaining." The cocktails arrived in spite of her fears and they toasted.

"The same toast?" she queried gaily.

"More than ever."

"It isn't like a regular job, David," she explained. "I won't have a salary, but I can earn quite a lot. At least, so I'm told, and Tom confirms it. I'm going to do all kinds of things that a woman should be able to do for a paper—society gossip, and interviews with women, and things seen from a woman's angle, and people at theatres and clubs, and so on. What do you think?"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"What about your own writing?"

"I'll have time to develop that. This job isn't an affair of fixed hours or anything like that. I'll have lots of time to carry on with my writing. Rather fun, don't you think?"

He said frankly, "I don't think it is, Fay. I think it can be jolly hard work, and I don't see how it's going to help you in your real work."

She had to explain, "But, David, this is my real work now! I've got to do it."

"Why?"

She told him, making clear the position of her father and her own position at the Club. She pointed out that she was making little money out of her writing—without mentioning the reason—and that unless she could earn enough to maintain herself she would have to return home.

"And I can't give up London, and all the people I know," she concluded.

He was sympathetic. "I didn't know things were like that, Fay. I'm awfully sorry. Perhaps I can give you a lift with one or two people I know in the newspaper game. They'd be glad to help—provided, of course, that you can produce good work."

"I'm going to, David. I'm going to work like a nigger for a change. I think perhaps you were right when you said one could get a lot of fun out of work."

"I meant that a man could. It's in his nature. I'm not so sure about a woman."

"Oh, why?"

"Because I think a woman's cut out for something else."

"A home, for instance?"

"That's along the line I was thinking."

"And love?"

"Certainly."

DAVID HAS AN IDEA

"And babies?"

"Decidedly."

"Feeling old-fashioned to-day?"

"Not too much." He appeared to be more interested in his food than in the drift of the conversation as he said: "That's not so old-fashioned that it won't be fashionable for all time, Fay. It just is! Women are like that. I think the things you've just mentioned are the things that really count for women. For lots of men, too, of course; but men don't feel the need of them so keenly as women. Work's all right in its place, but for most women it will always take a back place. And naturally so."

She said smilingly, "David, this sounds suspiciously like a proposal of marriage."

His eyes met hers, and there was a deep friendliness in them.

"It isn't," he said, "but I've got an idea."

He hesitated for a moment, apparently uncertain of her, and then continued slowly: "You want to stay in town, but you're not sure whether you can pay for the Club part of the business. And I'm almost always out of town. And I've got to pay for my flat whether I'm in London or out of it. Seems a pity that the place should lie empty, don't you think?"

She could hardly believe him. "You mean—?"

"Why not? You could easily stay in my flat for a time until you see just what the new job is likely to bring in. It would save your Club money. I'm seldom there, and I'm not expecting to be back in London for some time now, so why shouldn't you have the run of the place? I'd love you to take it on. Will you?"

"What would you do when you came back to town?"

"I only come for a day or two at a time, Fay, and you could put up somewhere for that time. Strikes me as an easy arrangement."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

It was tempting, terribly tempting, but full of difficulties.

"It's almost as if I were living with you, David."

He said frankly, "I wish you were."

"Don't joke. You must see that. After all, the place would be yours, and it would look pretty bad for me."

"Why? Don't people sub-let flats and houses?"

"Yes, but this wouldn't be that."

"Who's to know? Who's to know that you're not paying me a rent for the place? You can, later on, if you want to."

She put down her fork and met his eyes candidly.

"David, you know how I stand with you about things. We've had it out, and you know just why, and all the rest of it. Tell me honestly: this isn't—I mean, there are no strings attached to this offer, are there? Don't think I'm doubting you. It's just that I want to be sure of my own position."

He smiled: "You mean, is this merely a clever way of mine of getting what I want?"

She nodded, and he went on: "I don't do that, Fay. You've got to be made to see that. The old slogan: Nothing without consent."

"I'm tempted to accept. It would make it wonderfully easy for me. But I'm not sure of the thing, David."

"I've got another idea, then. Why not get Paddy to share the flat with you? It's not very big, but surely big enough for two girls who're willing to put up with a little discomfort for the sake of other things."

"That's a great idea!"

"Do you think she'd like it?"

"I'm sure she would."

"The bed's quite big enough for both of you, too."

"I had noticed that, David."

"And probably wondered?"

"Well, I'm naturally wicked."

DAVID HAS AN IDEA

They laughed together. Fay said, "You're a perfect darling. It's a marvellous idea, and I know Paddy will jump at it too. She's as sick of the Club as I am, and we could have a wonderful time in your place. I love it. We'd keep it awfully clean and tidy and all that, David. But you're sure you won't let the arrangement keep you away from the place? I'd hate to do that."

"Don't you worry! I want to come over and see something of you from time to time."

He said the words casually, and as casually she replied, "I want you to"; and afterward a silence grew up between them in which they were busy with their thoughts. She felt rather sad that he could talk so easily about going away and coming back to see her only from time to time, but she was elated at his offer.

It was the way out of her difficulty, and such a delightful way! While in the flat she would work hard at her new job and at her own writing, give up much of her playing, and make a real effort. She had no foolish ideas of making work the one thing in her life, but she realised that it would have to play a bigger part than it had done in the past. Its neglect had almost taken her back to where she had been four years earlier.

The meal passed pleasantly. They talked little, Fay being preoccupied with the new idea. Now and again Musgrave threw out suggestions, showing he knew the way her thoughts were wandering. They were quite sane suggestions, and she said once, "Aren't you a useful sort of person?" and he answered gaily: "You don't know what a help I am about a house!"

They parted soon after lunch, the man dashing off to keep a business appointment, Fay walking back to the Club, her head full of plans, to wait impatiently for Paddy Raine's return from her office. But she had no doubt about Paddy's reception of the proposal, and her

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

faith was well founded. Paddy Raine agreed enthusiastically.

"Ye gods! A flat of our own! Aren't we the little gold-diggers!" She seized Fay by the waist and fox-trotted round the room. "This will save me from doing the something desperate that I was afraid of, Fay. It's come just in time; just in time!"

Her eyes were shining. The wistfulness had gone out of her. She was like an eager schoolgirl off on a holiday. Fay envied the zest of her, but in a quieter way she was thrilled at the prospect.

And she was grateful to David Musgrave who had provided the means of escape. She showed something of her feelings during the three days that followed, when she willingly allowed him to monopolise her time. He disposed of his business quickly, but instead of returning immediately to Paris, suggested they should have a holiday together in town. She gladly agreed.

Together they lunched, dined, went to theatres. He was the perfect companion. He made no mention of the scene between them, did not once speak about his love for her, and never attempted to win her away from her resolution. He treated her as an understanding friend, and she responded to his lead. She threw off her guard completely and gave him a natural and kindly side of her which brought a quick pleased light into his brown eyes. She found it pleasant to be off guard with a man like Musgrave. He knew what he wanted in life, and what he could get, and no pose by any woman affected his attitude toward her.

Fay Sharon guessed he would not return to the discussion which had ended so disastrously for her, and she guessed rightly. As far as he was concerned, it had never happened. They were good friends, with something deeper between them that could only flame to life again when one had changed. She learned to know him

DAVID HAS AN IDEA

better in those three days and nights, and she cared for him more when they were over than when they began.

On the last evening of his visit she took Paddy with her to the flat to make their arrangements. Musgrave gave them drinks and they sat chatting. Later Tom arrived, kissing Paddy naturally and unashamedly as soon as he saw her.

"Thank you good people for looking after her," he said solemnly. "It takes a great weight off a parent's mind."

They cheered him noisily and then drew him into the discussion of their plans. Musgrave was returning to Paris on the following day, and was perfectly willing that the girls should begin their tenancy of his flat immediately. They agreed that when he came back to London they would live at the Club if his stay was for a week or longer; if shorter, they would put up at a hotel for the few nights. They formed a comic morality council and drew up a list of privileges and taboos; no foursome petting parties until Musgrave returned; no permission for Tom to see Paddy in the flat alone unless his designs had been submitted to and considered by the other two members of the council; and so on. Tom and Paddy laughed their derision at this taboo.

They finally resolved themselves into a house-warming party and cheerfully offered to help Musgrave pack, destroy all old love letters and incriminating evidence about the place, telephone his women friends announcing his demise, and send an "agony" notice to *The Times*. He in turn exacted from Fay and Paddy a promise that nothing found in the flat would be used against him for blackmail, that they would, as rent, buy one new gramophone record every week, and that each morning they would think of him gratefully and each evening remember him in their prayers. They promised faithfully,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

hands on hearts. Tom hummed the Dead March in *Saul*. It was very touching.

They sat late, Musgrave being reluctant to let them go. When finally they rose, and he went with them to the door, Fay lingered behind the others and whispered, "David, I believe you're quite lonely—and unhappy."

He answered, "Most men are lonely. And very few are happy."

She put her face close to his to be kissed. He brushed her mouth lightly with his lips.

"I think a kiss should mean something, Fay."

She drew back, hurt.

"I do, too, David. I want it to mean something. You know that."

"Do I?"

"You should." Then she said slowly: "Good-bye, David. I can't tell you how you've helped me out. I'm awfully grateful, and I shan't forget."

In the doorway gloom he looked tired.

"Don't be a fathead," he said uncomfortably. "You'd do lots more for anyone you cared for."

"I wonder." She kissed him again, warmly, unexpectedly, and ran to join the others. Musgrave was standing in the doorway when she looked back to wave to him.

They moved into his place the next evening, deciding to have all their things out of the Club by the end of the week. They were the subject of considerable outspoken speculation in the lounge before they left, which they listened to and enjoyed.

"So you've come into a fortune?" Lousy Greening said, unpleasantly pleasant. "Jermyn Street!"

"It's the wages of sin," Fay replied. "Don't you believe these stories about fortunes or legacies or anything like that, Lousy. It's good honest sin. Truth will out!"

DAVID HAS AN IDEA

"We're both damned," Paddy lamented. "It'll break my heart to leave the old Club, and all you nice girls. I *have* enjoyed your lectures on physiology, Lousy. My education was neglected until I came here."

"Oh, you haven't much to learn, Irish."

"Not now, darling! But once I was a crooning babe."

"Well, who would believe it!"

But it wasn't all like that. There were sincere expressions of regret at their departure. Fay had never really been known to the Club. She had been an aloof legend to many of the girls, a dazzling thing to wonder at from afar; but in a mysterious way she had captured most of them and had many unknown friends. Paddy had always been popular. She was the likeable type of girl that inspires comradeship on sight. When it came to the actual parting they found themselves leaving the Club with the merest tug of sentimental regret.

Fay locked her last case with the feeling that she was putting an end to one more phase. Another was beginning. She did not know what it would bring forth, and she told herself she did not care. Almost she believed that. This that was ended was to have produced so many good things and finished so many bad. It was to have brought happiness and security. But it had been meagre in its offerings.

She had come to the Club with hope quickening her pulses. She was leaving it, not with hope, but not hopeless, and behind her was the gaily coloured path of her four-year sojourn littered with men's names. They had never been men to her; only names. She saw that. The names of men who had played with her, and with whom she played; who had kissed and hoped, and hoped and handled; who had wasted their precious hours in wasting hers; whose portraits had followed each other, like the torn-off pages of a calendar, in the silver frame on her table. Just names! She could hardly remember some

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

of them now. Gerald Nortone; "Pinky" Smith; Dick Webster; Bobby Waterston; Tony Green; Alec Something-or-other; Ronnie Anton; Roger Blake; Jim Dale. . . . There were others. Most of them had played their part, flickered near the candle for a fleeting moment, and then flown on. Some still flickered.

They were the interesting men she had longed to meet. The future probably held more. She was not closing her eyes or her arms to those men of the future, but she regarded their advent with a waning faith. The old list was ending with David Musgrave. He was last man in! Or was he the first of a new list belonging to the new phase, and would his name in time be just like theirs—a name? She thought it more than likely. The new phase was the time in which she might win herself if not someone else. Only *she* could decide if that were actual gain or loss. Her throw was still for marriage; she had only put off, not faced, the alternatives.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

So Fay Sharon and Paddy Raine left the Georgian Club and settled in David Musgrave's flat, and there began for the older girl a period of hard work which was the harder because she was not used to it. She found it difficult at first to make much money, being new to newspaper life and its requirements, but she was luckier than most of the girls who are misguided enough to seek fame or fortune in Fleet Street. Tom was the great support. Without him she would have been swamped with misery and disappointment the first month. He came round to the flat in the mornings, lunched with her, saw her on every possible occasion, and all the time he loaded her with information and advice, and explained the why and wherefore of the million mysteries with which she was confronted.

She brought to her task intelligence and an ability to write, and only later discovered that her charm was the biggest of her assets. Until she made the discovery she was content to take on an altogether different personality from that of the Fay Sharon who had walked over people in the Georgian. From being someone who, in a small world, had counted, she found herself suddenly an insignificant cog in a mighty machine.

At first the thing baffled her. The huge organisation of a daily newspaper office, with its busy drones doing the most inexplicable things without having time to explain them, left her with the unhappy feeling that she was hopelessly incompetent. People flashed up and down stairs and in and out of offices; talked incessantly into

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

telephones; clattered on typewriters like slaughtering machine gunners; sat at tables in a large room—dozens of them, it seemed—and read pages and pages of “copy” which greedy boys tore triumphantly from ticking tape machines. People, warmly wrapped against a journey, whispered excitedly together while they waited on taxis, or cars, or aeroplanes, or submarines, or other weird travelling contrivances which this magical establishment could produce by the pressing of a button. People chortled, and chuckled, and fumed, and raged, and swept the place at alarming moments with gales of laughter; and gabbled at each other “. . . jolly good story”; “. . . get pictures at any price”; “. . . give it a couple of sticks”; “. . . you’ll get her record in the cuttings”; “. . . the A.P. have a story about this”; “. . . make it a double column intro.”; “. . . cable New York”; “. . . it’s a 10-inch triple”; and a thousand other things that meant everything to them and nothing at all to Fay Sharon.

She supposed that somewhere in this apparent chaos there was a system, a mighty ordering hand that sorted out the mess and brought out the clean-looking newspaper every morning, but she could at first discern no trace of it. It was a hopeless pandemonium, the more bewildering because she only glimpsed it and was so small a part of it. Was not even part of it; was there on sufferance—the sufferance of the quiet-voiced Scotsman who was called the news-editor; who seemed, in spite of a hard mouth, to be the kindest soul in the hive of industry.

He was very patient with her, and she was grateful. It never occurred to her that he looked at her through his unsmiling eyes and saw the possibilities of an attractive woman. She had character, presence. Just the kind of woman who could persuade information out of wary men, and who could “mix well” at social events. If only she had the intelligence to know *news* when she

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

saw it, he'd bet his shirt he'd picked a winner. But Fay Sharon knew nothing of his thoughts or his gamble in underwear. She had yet to learn that whatever Fleet Street prided itself upon it was not the beauty and charm of its women journalists, and she was pleasantly amazed that he took time to step out of the hubbub to make many mysteries clear to her.

So she learned humbly, unaware of her own strength, and she learned very slowly. The game was more difficult than she had imagined. It was beset with innumerable traps. Writing, she soon discovered, was the least necessary of her attributes. There were people called "subs" who took the pages she spent much thought over, and into which she had slipped the finest words she knew, and brutally slashed her beautiful work to pieces, substituted quite ordinary words for her elaborate ones, and sometimes rewrote the stuff altogether in their own way. It was bewildering and humiliating, an insult to one if one had not the sense to realise that surely there must be a reason for everything, and those people obviously must know why they did it.

It was there that Tom helped her. He explained, telling her that what was wanted was not fine writing, but news—facts, information—presented in a crisp, interesting way for the man or woman who would glance at it the following morning while strap-hanging in a tube or tram. When there was beautiful writing to be done, he said tersely, someone more experienced than she would do the job. He made a point of seeing her before she wrote her copy for McAdam, the news-editor, and discussed it with her, showing her as far as he could wherein lay its strength and its weakness, but he was handicapped in this, as the material Fay was searching for was material with which he himself was not too well acquainted.

She had been set the task of getting "gossip"—

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

interesting paragraphs about well-known people—for the “Society” columns. She did not know that dozens of other people were employed by the newspaper in this heart-breaking task, and McAdam gave her no indication of its difficulties when he suggested it. It seemed the easiest thing in the world, the way he showed it to her. She would get all kinds of fun and amusement out of it, going to theatres and night clubs and big public luncheons and dinners without having to pay a sou for any of them! All she had to do was to get to know people—he assumed that she knew many well-known people in society already, and she had sense enough to nod a casual affirmative—and keep in touch with their doings and sayings, become a good listener and watcher, and miss nothing! Until she had learned what was news and what wasn’t, she would discuss her “copy” with him before she wrote it.

In this way she had the help of both men, and made a better impression on McAdam because of Tom’s previous interrogating, but the work was surprisingly hard and exacting. She had never visualised the effort behind the interesting or foolish information she had always read in her daily newspaper. One never thought of how it appeared there. Presumably it just happened. She learnt now of the unceasing search and the untiring effort to discover information.

The newspaper had no knowledge of the human needs and private lives of its slaves. It demanded their surrender. For it they worked long hours, and schemed and planned and worried and lied and sinned. They effaced self, becoming a team of untiring toilers feeding a giant machine. The thing that had seemed inhuman was almost emotionally human. She became aware of the common bond that bound these people and the common enthusiasm for the paper they served. They did not talk about it: they revealed it, in every thought and action, in every

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

ounce of energy put into the finding and writing of every "story"; revealed it in their eyes when they came back to the office and said, "Got that story all right, Mac. It's a good one. And we've got it to ourselves, I think."

That was the great thing: getting stories to themselves! It was a mystery to Fay what the phrase meant, but she quickly became conscious of the eternal fight being waged between rival newspapers, the keen competition to get the biggest exclusive news, the best writers, the latest pictures. Her paper gradually became "we", "ourselves"; all the unnamed and unmentionable rivals became "the others"—to be criticised, to be watched like criminals, but above all to be beaten. Beaten in the life-and-death race for news and the bigger news that always lies behind news.

The loyalty, never expressed, of the people connected with the paper amazed her. She knew nothing of other newspaper offices and was ignorant therefore of a similar loyalty in all these buildings. When she had her first story printed—all items of news were called stories—she began to understand something of this devotion to the medium of her creative work. While she never really became fired with the enthusiasm of her fellows on the paper, she could understand it and appreciate it. The thing that puzzled her most at first—because she did not see the necessity for it—was their will to work.

They clung tenaciously to the slightest hint of a story, making innumerable telephone calls, sending telegrams, hunting up reference books and maps and time-tables, persistently interviewing people who did not want to be interviewed and who snubbed and insulted them, and going off at shortest notice and at most inconvenient times on long train and car journeys. They slaved that their paper would not be "left," that on the morning

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

they would tell the truth about certain events, or have failed only after every possible avenue for getting it had been explored.

It was a steady, willing grind which was the sterner because it appeared to be their pleasure as well as their work. They enjoyed it. The paper was them, each one of them, from the merest copy boy right up to the editor. Something of each went into the folded finished paper, with all its strange contacts with life, that landed every morning on the breakfast tables of a million homes throughout the country. That was the secret of their disease: they were creating. And what they created, toiling over it with sweat and skill and patience, was revealed to the world and admired or scorned or disbelieved. But it was noticed. And behind it they were noticed. And that was their reward.

They had the difficult task of working always with the clock in mind. Unlike most other workers, they could not sigh wearily and put off a job till the morrow if they were disinclined for it. At exactly the same minute each night the editions started printing. They did not wait; they were timed to catch trains which would take the paper to distant towns and villages. If the stories were not secured and written in time, the editions went without them—and the smarter rival papers had news the following morning that *they* hadn't. Which, of course, was unthinkable. The editions carried the news all right, but they did not show the effort and toil of the achievement.

All this Fay Sharon learned slowly. The hubbub meant little to her at first. She went to McAdam for instructions, or he telephoned her, and he asked her to do things, or get information, the ultimate purpose of which she could not even guess. Her early days were fruitless, but Tom told her not to worry; she was only finding her feet. Things would shape themselves slowly

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

but surely; she'd get the hang of the game without a doubt.

And she did, but very slowly and not without making many mistakes and causing herself considerable worry and trouble. McAdam urged her to study the paper carefully, to read every inch of it, and to read *behind* it and try to find out how the stories were obtained. He put her on to simple assignments, letting her try her wings at various social events. She wrote much, too much, and was bitterly chagrined to see none of it appear in the paper.

Her first week's earnings were just—nothing. But the tuition of Tom and the perseverance of Mac—as she came to know him—bore fruit. Her first paragraph in the gossip page appeared early in the following week, and after previous disappointment and anxiety she was thrilled to see it. Besides, it meant money, and that was what she had to earn.

Mac was a devil to please. He had given up his soul to the paper years before, and he did his best to win for his mistress the souls of everybody else who had to pass through his hands. He was more patient with Fay than he had been with anyone, but that was out of no special regard or consideration for the girl, but because he was convinced she would prove an asset to him and to the paper. He saw through her to the printed columns she might help materially to fill. And that was his life.

Once or twice on the way toward efficiency she gave him an anxious moment or two. She had been talking over a social function with him, discussing the people who were to be there, and he had suggested that there might be a story in Lady Dunrenny, who had just returned from Egypt.

"Have a chat with her," he said. He spoke very quietly, with no emotion in his voice, but with an undoubted Scots accent. His lips often broke into a dry reluctant

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

smile, but his eyes remained the same whether he smiled or scowled. "She's just your line for good society stuff. Let her talk. She may have met a Sheik or some English girl who's gone crazy on one; or heard some new story about Tut's tomb and the death menace; and she's sure to have met dozens of interesting people at Shepherd's."

He drawled out several other things that Lady Dunrenny might have done. It was his way of giving her an idea of the job she was on and the material it might produce. He had imagination, and an immense knowledge of people. He was prolific in ideas, guiding his reporters along strange paths, and opening their eyes to undreamed of "angles" from which their stories might be attacked.

He was something entirely new in Fay Sharon's life, and she liked him. She was very keen to please him, and she listened well to his suggestions about Lady Dunrenny. She listened too well. She went from him remembering only Lady Dunrenny, and forgetting the little she had learned about journalism.

When she reported on her return, she was rather discouraged.

"I couldn't get her to talk about herself, Mr McAdam," she regretted.

Mac was busy while he listened to her. His head was bent over a map on his desk, and his assistant was searching the index file for the telephone number of one of the paper's correspondents in a remote area of the country. Mac fingered the map and spoke while he scrutinised. "That's too bad."

Fay tried to excuse herself: "She wouldn't say a word about herself or Egypt or the people she had met."

The head remained bent. "She's usually a gabbler," Mac said into the map.

"Oh, she talked plenty, but said nothing interesting,

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

nothing about herself." She was glad Mac took it so casually. "She couldn't seem to get away from her husband. Talked about him almost all the time."

The head remained bent. "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing *wrong* with him. But she kept on about some silly estate or park or something of his that he was going to throw open for the public. It's worth a lot of money, she says."

The head shot up, and Mac's unsmiling eyes looked into hers. At the same moment his assistant paused in his search to jerk a glance in her direction. Simultaneously they saw the story the girl had missed, and Mac's hand reached out and pressed the button on his table.

As he did so, realisation came to Fay Sharon, and the warm colour surged to her face. But she could not take her eyes off the eyes across the table. They were looking at her fixedly, and in them she read McAdam's troubled thought: "God, she's fallen down on it. She's a loser after all."

He said quietly, "Not the Marlcourt Park, by any chance?"

She answered quickly, "That's it. I'm terribly sorry, Mr McAdam; I didn't realise——"

He was not listening to her. "Mr Oliver," he snapped to the boy who put his head round the door in answer to his summons; and a minute later, "Oh, Oliver," to the reporter who strolled into the room; "there's a story in the air that Lord Dunrenny is going to give Marlcourt Park to the public. Very important. Quarter of a million estate, if I remember rightly. See what's in it. Take Soames with you. I want an interview, too."

He paused and continued slowly: "Dunrenny lost his only child a year ago. This park for the nation—for the

children! Open air. Health! There may be a line there."

Oliver disappeared. Mac turned to his assistant.

"Let Chadleigh know. He'll want good pictures of the estate. And there's a good story in Dunrenny's life. Self-made man; began as an office boy with five shillings a week, or something like that. He can have the stuff ready if the story's O.K."

The story was O.K. Fay Sharon opened her paper in the morning and saw it all there. A streamer line across the page announced:

LORD DUNRENNY'S £200,000 GIFT
TO NATION.

The story was "splashed" underneath, complete with pictures, interviews with Lord and Lady Dunrenny, interesting biographical information, and Mac's "line" skilfully worked in. She seized the other papers and glanced quickly at their main pages. They had no mention of the gift. Fay and her colleagues had the news to "themselves."

"You did good work on that story," Mac praised her, late that afternoon.

"I let you down horribly," she said, flushing at the memory.

"Oh, no, you got it all right, and you saw you'd got it the moment you realised what it was worth. That's where there's hope. If you hadn't seen your mistake you'd have been useless."

She did not know what to reply, and he laughed at her.

"Didn't you get Lady Dunrenny to talk to you?" he asked.

"Yes, but I wanted her to talk about other things."

"And now you've learned to listen to everything. And

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

weren't there other people from the other gang who tried to get her to talk to *them*?"

"I'm sure I don't know. She wouldn't let me away from her."

"Exactly!" He was quietly glad. His shirt gamble looked safe enough. "She liked you! She told *you* what she didn't tell anybody else. You got the goods." He became busy at his table. "I'm putting through a fiver for you for that story."

"A *fiver*!" She stared at him. "Five pounds?"

"No—guineas!"

"Aren't you a darling, *Mac*?"

He looked up, saying, "That's better. It gives me a chance of calling you Fay, like all these other young beggars about here. There's a couple of extra tickets here for the first show of "Blue Swan" to-night. Want them?"

She had taken them and gone with Paddy, and they celebrated afterwards at the flat, asking Tom along when he finished at midnight. There were many outings like that. They were her work, her little part in keeping her paper in touch with all kinds of people and their activities. She enjoyed them once she understood what was expected of her, but there were times when they were irksome and tiring. It was one thing going to a night club for pleasure, and another going there on a job.

Her life became a crowded thing, a round of affairs, gay gatherings, dull parties, first nights. The circle of her acquaintances widened. Because she had not sought this, she did not at first perceive she was achieving what once she had desired to achieve. But as she found her feet in the office, men drifted into her life again. She was too busy and too harassed in the beginning to take much notice of them. In the office they were vague faces, not men. She was unable to pick out the details

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

or note the points of any one of her colleagues. But in time they took shape, and she found she was popular with them.

They were a new lot to her. She had never had contact with men as they pursued the course of their daily labours. Mostly they had been friends whom one saw only in the evening, or for a brief space at lunch. She had forgotten that the men who had taken her to theatres and dances had a daily existence in which work figured. Now she was thrown in contact with men who met her, not to entertain her, but to slog with her at the production of the paper. They were not on "party" behaviour when they spoke to her, or out to win her favours. They talked shop, and were frank and critical and not a bit afraid of her. She was conscious that she was liked; but she doubted if they cared twopence whether she liked them in return.

They were disturbingly young, many of them being younger than Fay herself, and they made strange individual parts of a happy team. As she got to know them better she felt they were still schoolboys, too grown-up in some things, and too childish in others. They were drawn from every class, as was natural in an enterprise that touched life at every point and catered for every class, but there was no class. Like self, it had been effaced. The one thing that mattered to this very young and likeable crowd of men was the paper.

They believed nothing, and believed everything. They sprouted cynicism and nourished secret ideals. Their job made the cynicism. Of the lot she saw most of Dewar Temple, who appeared to take life seriously. He was a combination of dramatic critic and theatre gossip, and he turned up at the office only at infrequent intervals, but his work in the evenings brought them often together. Sometimes they went to plays together and to night clubs afterward, when he had telephoned

THE STREET OF MISADVENTURE

his story to the office. He was forty, with black hair greying rapidly, a loose, actor-like face, with soft grey eyes and a mouth that twisted itself into an expression of most of his thoughts. Distinguished looking, morose, kindly, and likeable. He was willing to be friendly, he never talked love or tried to pet or kiss her, and she enjoyed his friendship. Next to Mac, for whom her early liking never weakened, in spite of his occasional harshness and quiet sarcasm, she put Dewar Temple.

The third place in the table of her choice was occupied by young Hicks, a burbling, twenty-three year old friend of Tom's, whose high spirits provided the office with its many laughs, and who was eternally being threatened with dismissal by Mac. Life to Hicks was one joy after another. He played at work, and worked at play, and in spite of his foolishnesses was one of the young men marked out for success. He it was who handled all the stories lending themselves to humorous treatment. Was there a politician who declared he could not touch his toes? Then Hicks wrote half a column that was a delight. Were there women who formed themselves into a Society for Down-trodden Wives? Then Hicks looked at Mac and Mac looked at Hicks, and shortly the boy's typewriter was rattling out a screed that only husbands could enjoy.

Fay welcomed his friendship. She got on remarkably well with youngsters of this type. He was very like Dicky Webster, but had more life to him and more gaiety. He made love to her unashamedly, but it was a playful love that was as much a joke to him as his work.

"Have you seen this story?" he would say to her, lowering his voice dramatically, slipping a sheet of paper into her hand. "Awful, isn't it? It's about you!" and she would glance at the page, and read:

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

FLEET STREET TRAGEDY.

Love for Girl Kills Boy's Laughter.

BEAUTIFUL FAY SHARON

"You are so cruel" cry in last letter.

There followed usually a heart-rending story which she chuckled over and pressed to her heart, while Hicks eyed her soulfully and reached for his handkerchief. He was great fun, and they did many things together, usually in the mornings, or on Saturdays when there was no paper coming out the next day. Occasionally they golfed, but Fay was so busy consolidating her position on the paper that she worked when often she might have played. Outside the office, also, her circle of friends grew and most of her time was fully occupied.

CHAPTER IX

SPRING BRINGS A BIRTHDAY

TIME slipped past as Fay gained ground in the office. Spring came, and she was put on the salary list of the paper. She was glad. It meant less anxiety, if not less effort, and it was a mark of confidence in her that restored her old assurance. Not that her old assurance had ever really gone, or that she had suddenly become a brow-beaten wage slave. But the Fay Sharon of the Georgian Club had temporarily been forgotten while the Fay Sharon of Jermyn Street made her position secure.

She found herself enjoying much of her work, and she grew used to the flat and to Paddy Raine's company. Saturdays were their best evenings, for there was no paper in the morning, and Fay was free to bring Hicks or Temple to the flat; sometimes both were there, and they had many gay nights together. Once or twice they had bigger parties, crowding the flat uncomfortably; occasionally she slipped off and left the place to Paddy and Tom.

She knew they were interested in each other and she could appreciate that sometimes they wanted to be together, and alone. She had often been in a similar position herself when she had longed for just the kind of advantage she could give to Paddy. It rather pleased her to be an amateur match-maker for once. Paddy saw it was done deliberately and often tried to reciprocate, endeavouring to leave Fay alone in the flat with any man she thought the older girl was particularly interested in at the moment. But Fay Sharon smiled and would have none of it. A queer, quixotic twist in her suggested that

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

it was unfair to use the flat David Musgrave had given them for the purpose of listening to the wooing of another man.

But she told herself she was quixotic only because she was not tempted. There was no man on her horizon, out of a few new acquaintances who might themselves have been willing, with whom she wanted to play. Had there been, she would not have scrupled to take advantage of every opportunity of getting what she wanted. She had always been as honest with herself as any one person ever is, and she acknowledged that, like all women, she allowed little to stand in the way of what she wanted.

Spring, which brought its reward for her effort, brought the usual stirrings in her breast. It brought also another birthday. She woke one morning to remember she was twenty-seven.

Twenty-seven. It was unbelievable. Three more years and she was out of her twenties. Towards the forty mark! Toward the time when the best in life was no longer to be had. Already she was letting time slip away with her youth and everything belonging to youth. Twenty-seven! Soon she would be at a dangerous age even to contemplate having a first baby. She had read that twenty-eight was late enough; the Club, in the choice tit-bits of information thrown round the lounge fire on winter evenings, had definite views on the subject. She had laughed at their fears when she was twenty-three, but at twenty-seven she was too near the age of their fears to be heroic.

Life, which she had been keeping under thumb of late, suddenly became a very blue affair once more. She felt depressed at breakfast, and showed it, and Paddy Raine who did not guess the cause tried to dispel it in the old burlesque way.

“Feeling nervy? Repressed? Irritable? Tired in the

SPRING BRINGS A BIRTHDAY

mornings after sleepless nights?" she chanted. "What you want, my dear, is a man!"

Fay answered irritably, "I know it is," and busied herself with the coffee.

She did not usually breakfast with Paddy, lying late after her night-work; but she was going into the country on a story for Mac, and an early rise had been necessary. She had not yet opened the increased number of envelopes on her plate when Paddy made the remark.

She reached for them, and the other girl, disappointed, said, "Sorry, darling. I didn't know you were suffering from Spring."

"Not Spring," she said harshly. "From Winter. The Winter of life," and then laughed because it sounded so foolish.

Paddy stared, and Fay explained.

"My birthday to-day. Hence the pile of condolences. They haven't the tact to forget, or they're sporting enough to pretend it's unnecessary. But they'll drop off soon, I hope. It's a depressing reminder."

"Oh, that's silly. You're not so old, Fay."

"Not too old." She watched Paddy keenly while she said, "but I'm twenty-seven, and that's old enough."

She saw the eyelids of the other girl flutter as she hid a momentary confusion, and was not deceived by the gay laugh and the expostulation: "Oh, you dear old lady!"

She had surprised Paddy. Shocked her, even. To twenty-year-old Paddy twenty-seven did appear a mature age. She was forced to say: "You don't look anything like that, Fay," revealing that she thought it was an age at which one should show signs of wear and tear! It was silly to worry about advancing age. One was bound to age. But one wasn't bound to avoid doing silly things, and Fay Sharon did this one. The Spring day was spoilt for her. She examined her gifts, and was warmed by

no feeling of happiness that people had remembered her and wished to make her glad.

In the days that followed she grew languid and tired. The strain of the unusual work began to tell, and in the reaction the office grew distasteful and her small share of the labour of bringing out the paper monotonous and irksome. She was annoyed that the others did not share her weariness, and dismayed by the enthusiasm which Mac and Tom and Hicks and most of the staff brought to bear on the nightly grind. Temple was the only one who showed signs of suffering from her complaint, and she thought ruefully that that was because he also was ageing. He was forty!

She enjoyed a quiet pleasure in his company. He did not trouble her with his attentions or bore her with the details of his private life, although she would have liked sometimes to hear more about that. He was always willing to fall in with her wishes, and her one complaint against him was that she felt just too safe with him. She had been so used to the compliment of being thought desirable that his attitude was disturbing in its novelty.

About this time they both agreed that the office was slavery, drudgery, damnation, and a dozen other things, and that the only life worth living was on a desert island in the South Seas, thousands of miles from the roar of London. The dull man did not even give her the mental excitement of suggesting they should go off together to seek it. He was different from all the others she had known. He wanted nothing, sought nothing, expected nothing. While she thought his difference a little disappointing, she definitely liked him.

They agreed to make up a party in the early summer to go to the sea for a week or two, to do nothing but bathe and laze in the sun, to eat and sleep and talk about nothing that counted, to forget the office and the paper. They discussed this at some length, and approached

SPRING BRINGS A BIRTHDAY

friends with the idea, for that was the mood they were in as Spring quickened its lazy tread toward warmer days; and Fay Sharon, surfeited with late nights and stifling ballrooms and bad plays and columns of gossip and stories, longed to get a breath of sea air to dispel her growing moodiness.

She did not hide from herself at this time that much of her discontent grew out of the inexplicable silence of David Musgrave. From the night when she kissed him at the door of his flat she had not seen or heard from him again. She had expected him to write occasionally and was disappointed and hurt that he had found it so easy to forget her. She had not much noticed his indifference in the early days of her work, her time being so fully occupied, but as the days lengthened and she had more leisure she found herself with more thoughts of Musgrave running through her head.

She was tempted to write to him sometimes, but was restrained by an uneasy fear that he might regard this step as the initial approach to the arrangement between them which she knew he desired. She had expected, and Paddy had expected, too, that he would pay them an occasional visit from Paris, and at first they kept themselves prepared against such an arrival; but gradually he slipped out of all their arrangements and they forgot they were only tenants of the flat during the pleasure of the absent owner.

At first when they bought the weekly gramophone record as rent, they chose one which they thought Musgrave might also care for; eventually they selected the records they wanted to play for their own amusement. They stacked their books in his bookshelves and bought various knick-knacks for the place, and their occupation built up a cosy bachelor home in which they were both happy. They became attached to the flat, Fay spending many hours in it that formerly would have been spent

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

in a different way; and between the girls there developed a strong and sincere friendship. Tom Sharon's part in the cementing of this companionship was a small one. The fact that he cared for both girls, and came often to see them, had little to do with the making of the strong pact between Fay and Paddy. They suited each other.

That was the secret. They had never known each other in the Club, but living together in the flat they discovered their mutual tastes, their likes and dislikes, and a queerly similar outlook on life. The one thing Fay Sharon did not understand about the Irish girl was her spirit. Paddy Raine's "doing something desperate" was not to be taken lightly. She meant what she said. She had some strange views on men and life, and a stranger courage to support her views. Which was disconcerting, but attractive, to Fay Sharon, who had dreams and desires, but only subterfuge to seek their fulfilment.

CHAPTER X

MAC SMELLS NEWS—

(i)

NEWSPAPER life became increasingly tiresome as the days grew warmer. The one thing Fay Sharon looked forward to was the holiday party at the sea. But occasionally she was engaged on an interesting story that took her thoughts off herself. She was thinking of the sea rather than the demands of the paper as she went into Mac's room one afternoon in answer to his summons.

"Have you ever heard of Princess Sadrine?" he asked.

She shook her head absently.

"Never. What is she? Persian or something?"

"I'm not sure." Mac looked at a letter on his table. "Or a place called the House of Hope?"

She shook off her listlessness and gave him her attention. It was a job evidently. Another rotten story to go on!

"Never heard of it either," she answered briefly.

He looked at her quizzically. "It's got a good address. Pont Street, Mayfair."

"Oh?" She waited.

Mac read the letter again. "There may be nothing in this, but it's worth going into. You never know; might turn out a first class story. And I think you're just the person to tackle it."

She felt like interrupting: "I feel like tackling nothing on earth so much as a lovely holiday," but he was explaining the job to her.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"This Princess Sadrine is apparently making a fairly good thing out of foolish women who have more money than brains. She's got a house with a good address, where she's set up a sort of temple of faith—a House of Hope, she calls it—and where she *advises* women. Good word, that. It seems she can advise them into good health, into happy love affairs, even into contact with friends who have died."

"Very good of her," Fay murmured.

"Isn't it? The one big thing her clients need is Hope. If they can hope enough, the Princess will do almost anything for them."

"At a price?"

"At a very stiff price, according to this letter."

Fay said wearily, "Seems just an ordinary kind of ramp, Mac, doesn't it?"

"Except that she's managed to rope in some of the best known women in England," he said seriously. "And she claims to be a Princess. That may be perfectly true; but she's attracting to her house some people whose private lives would make interesting material for, say, a blackmailer."

Fay Sharon came to life. She had suddenly remembered.

"This is interesting, Mac. I didn't recognise the woman from her name or from the House of Hope, but I heard lately of this business—I'm sure it must be the same woman—and tried to get on the track of her. I had no luck, though. She's very exclusive, and only sees people who are really worth while. I remember now. It's very difficult to get access to her unless you're introduced by at least half a dozen peeresses or some silly thing like that. She's become quite a fad."

"Seems to be the same woman. What do you know about her?"

"Nothing else, Mac. I've already tried to get in touch,

MAC SMELLS NEWS

but didn't even know her name or address. She swears her clients to the strictest secrecy."

"Who told you about her?"

"Mabel Warnham."

"The Countess of Warnham? That's good. What'd she say?"

"Only hinted. Started gushing about this wonderful new person that bored society women were taking their troubles to, and then suddenly remembered her vows of secrecy and closed up like an oyster; and all my pumping didn't bring another word out of her. I made some inquiries and heard the merest whispers of the thing in another quarter, but so far haven't been able to tie anything down."

Mac said quickly, "It's the same woman! Now look here: you've got to persuade the Countess of Warnham to get you into this. I don't care how you do it, but you've got to! You must have a sitting with this Princess. She may be a Princess, although we can find no trace of her, but I'm sure she's swindling those foolish women. There's a good story in her somewhere. If she's genuine, it's a little more dangerous, but even then it lends itself to a first-rate descriptive story of one of her sittings or seances or whatever she calls them. Merely to describe one of them, with all the fatuous advice she's sure to chuck around, would be a good yarn. She seems to be a cross between Psycho-analyst, Christian scientist, and spiritualist; and if Mayfair women are tumbling over each other in their hurry to get to her, the rest of the country's going to be interested in your account of the business."

"What if it's more serious? Blackmail?"

"I begin to doubt it," Mac said slowly. "You'd probably have heard more of it. And we should most likely have got wind of it here. Why should she blackmail anyway? She's sure to be charging tremendous figures

out of the people you mention. If she's so exclusive, they're paying for the exclusiveness and all the humbug that's bound to go with it. So she's making good money without the danger of the other thing. I'll bet it's a pantomime! I'd love to see it. And it's up to you to find out all about her."

A ladder of sunlight streamed across the room and over the littered table. A minute before Fay Sharon had longed to be out in the sunshine; now she had become again the cog in the machine that saw no sunshine, no rest, no normality.

"I'll do my best, Mac."

"And if you could get a photograph!" he threw out. She laughed. "Will a dozen please you?"

"One would be enough!" His lips smiled, and he continued soberly: "This is a good thing you're on, Fay. You can write a fine story out of this, but you've got to be very careful. Get in at all costs as one of those exclusive clients, and have a sitting. Tell her some tall tale and watch for results. I expect she's up to all kinds of tomfoolery with incense burning and robes and the rest of the game. So keep your eyes and ears open. It may be a dangerous story to handle, and if we can't prove anything against the woman we'll likely have to run it in a light way, poking fun at it. But I'd prefer to get a stronger story. I leave it to you. You know what I want all right."

"I can guess. I'm going to try through Mabel Warnham, Mac. Better than making a direct attack on the house."

"Oh, my God, rather! And I wouldn't lose too much time on it. There's just a chance that this woman"—he picked up the letter from the table—"may have written to one of the other papers. We don't want them getting the story before us."

She agreed that that would be a matter for ashes and

lamentations, and getting McAdam to initial her I.O.U. for expenses on account of the story, went into the cashier's office on the way down to draw the money, and then walked out to the street and the sunshine.

She was cool and confident about the task in front of her. She had not revealed her hand to Mac, but she started off with a signal advantage in knowing the Countess of Warnham, for Mabel Warnham was considerably in her debt. The Countess did not know that Fay was employed by a newspaper, and on a previous occasion during the winter when she had been running a ball for one of her charities which the public had shown a disinclination to support, Fay Sharon had come to her aid by suggesting that an editor friend of hers might print something about it if Fay asked him nicely. And the editor friend had decently done so, with the result that the ball had been a great success. Mabel Warnham, unlike many other society women in similar situations, had been grateful. She was not to know how Mac had cursed when he saw the "confounded puff," or how the chief sub-editor had nearly killed it. It appeared in the paper, and the Countess of Warnham was for ever a friend. Bread cast upon the waters! The proverb that every journalist knows to be true.

So Fay Sharon telephoned her friend and asked if she might drop in for a chat. The gushy little voice invited her to come along for tea, and Fay hummed happily and hailed a passing taxi. In a few minutes she was sitting facing fluffy Mabel Warnham in her Wilton Place house, and she did not waste time. When over the teacups they had made the usual conversational remarks, Fay said :

"I would like you to take me along to Princess Sadrine sometime."

The other looked at her sharply. "Princess Sadrine?"

"Yes. Don't you remember mentioning to me the

wonderful woman who could tell you all kinds of clever things?"

"I didn't know I mentioned her name, my dear."

Fay stirred her tea. "Didn't you? I could have sworn you did."

"Surely not. I promised to keep it secret, and as far as I know I haven't broken that promise." She became agitated. "I do hope I haven't told anybody else."

"Surely it doesn't matter with *me*? I have heard so much about the Princess, and would just love to have her advice."

The Countess of Warnham looked troubled. "Did I tell you about her?"

"You told me something. Don't you remember? How remarkable she was, and how truthful, and helpful? But naturally I've listened to the stories of other friends also. They all agree that she's an amazing woman."

"Oh." She was relieved. "I'm so glad someone else has spoken to you about her. I was sure they couldn't keep it a secret. She is indeed amazing, my dear! Do you know, I feel ever so much better since I've been having Confidences with her."

"Confidences?"

"She calls her sittings 'Confidences.' They are really confessionals. You tell the Princess everything you can concerning the matter on which you want help, and she listens and then gives her advice."

"She's quite extraordinary, isn't she?"

"She's *wonderful*." The Countess leaned forward to emphasise her enthusiasm, and her little lined face became serious. "She has been more than wonderful in my case. I cannot tell you why it was that I went to her at all, but I have certainly not regretted it, and I shall go and see her again often."

Fay Sharon listened sympathetically. "And you will

MAC SMELLS NEWS

take me to see her? I would like so much to give her my confidence and get her help."

The Countess hesitated.

"Are you in trouble about something?" she asked gently.

"I am greatly worried." Fay did not hate herself for the form of duplicity which she had been forced to practise so often that she had grown used to it, but she loathed the situation that occasioned its necessity. "I want the help of a sympathetic woman who knows the world and understands people. I would very much appreciate your doing this for me."

The look she gave the older woman was meant to remind her of the debt she owed Fay Sharon, and it succeeded.

Mabel Warnham touched her hand. "I shall mention you to the Princess. I cannot promise that she will see you. I must first of all tell her something about you; she insists upon that. But if I can use any persuasion to get you a hearing you know I shall." She thought for a moment and said: "You have Hope?"

"Hope?"

"You must have Hope. It is the Princess's word for faith. If you have no hope you have no chance with any of your troubles. That is the principal article in her creed. It is so beautiful."

Fay wondered that so able a woman as Mabel Warnham should see something strangely new and beautiful in so old a belief, but she did not voice her thoughts. She had learnt to be a good listener, and she let the other woman talk. It was clear that the mystery Princess had a loyal believer and supporter in the Countess of Warnham, who talked at some length of her amazing powers, obviously convinced of the infallibility of both the Princess and her creed.

When Fay questioned her regarding the title, she

gained no information. Little was known of the Princess. She had come to London quietly, unostentatiously, and few people knew much about her, but gradually in a secret and confidential way her fame had been whispered to the ears of Mayfair. At first Mayfair was sceptical; quickly it grew curious; subsequently it believed; and finally it pleaded for an audience with the woman. The mere fact that she discriminated with her "Confidences", rebuffing people who were used to getting what they wanted, glamoured her with a suggestion of unattainableness that piqued the many who had been refused and made them more eager to gain her favour. It also dispelled any lingering doubt that she was a charlatan. No charlatan, they reasoned, would refuse money offered in such a generous way. This woman turned away hundreds of pounds.

By doing so she made thousands. It was evident from what the Countess of Warnham said that Princess Sadrine, whether innocently or designedly, was doing tremendous business with her peculiar entertainment for the leisure moments of wealthy women. They flocked to her. The names the Countess mentioned in evidence of the wonderful drawing power of the Princess made Fay Sharon shiver with eager anticipation to handle her story.

But it was going to be difficult. While her friend assured her that she would use every possible persuasion, she could not hold out too strong a hope of an audience, and advised Fay not to be optimistic. She arranged to telephone the result of her pleading immediately after her own "confidence" in the middle of the following week, and with that promise Fay Sharon had to be content.

She was not too happy with the arrangement. Her holiday loomed pleasantly ahead. They had agreed to go to Scotland—to North Berwick—where they hoped to

MAC SMELLS NEWS

find quietness and cool east winds, and she dreaded to think that her plans might be upset by protracted investigations into the activities of Princess Sadrine. The job she was engaged on might prove a long one, necessitating several visits to the House of Hope—if she were lucky enough to get even a first one—and many delicate enquiries in other directions. Mac, too, was annoyed that she could not get the story quicker, but he held down his impatience and gave her an easier time while the affair was pending. His consideration only allowed her more time to feel the oppression of the warm days and the growing stir of revolt within her.

Her restlessness increased as the weary days dragged their slow hours to stifling nights. Life hung heavily about her and she longed to have the Princess Sadrine business finished and off her hands. She saw the woman as an obstacle blocking the way to her holiday and rest, and, moodily, unreasoningly, she began to hate her. The consciousness of this foolish dislike brought her to the realisation that she was nearing a nervous smash, and Tom, to whom she confided her fear, urged her to make a clean breast to McAdam, postpone the affair and get away at once for a few weeks.

She told him in the flat. Paddy, sitting at the open window drawing in deep breaths of the cool night air, looked fixedly at Fay, pretended not to hear, and remained at the window with her own thoughts.

"I can't do that," Fay said petulantly. "It means letting Mac down on the story, and I'm the only person in the office at present who's got the ghost of a chance of seeing the woman. I can't cave in just now, Tom."

He protested, "But don't you see that if you allow this business to get on your nerves so much you won't be in a fit state to handle the story? You confess now that you're beginning to hate the woman. How then can you tackle her affairs unprejudiced? And if you

get a grouch against her which becomes a positive dislike you're a danger to the paper—not a help!”

“How?” She stared at him in surprise.

“Simple. Mac would be the first to appreciate the position, too, if he knew about it. By going to see this woman prejudiced against her you're in danger of seeing the story only as you want to see it. You're not tackling it with an open mind, and therefore you may be swayed by your likes and dislikes, one way or the other, and you'll probably libel her badly. The paper suffers for that, not you.”

She was silent while she thought it over.

“Take my advice, Fay,” her brother urged, “and tell Mac how you feel. Get away on your holiday now. Don't wait for this story. You may mess it up anyway!”

She smiled. “Family faith! I'm all right, Tom, really. Tired a little, that's all. It'll pass as soon as I get this job over. I know myself fairly well, and I've a pretty good idea what's the matter with me.”

But that was only a pretence on her part. She did not know what was wrong with her, although she guessed that the hot weather and the strain of her work had much to do with her languor. She had bouts of depression which puzzled and alarmed her. A heavy weight lay on her, colouring her daily life; and because she wanted so much to see David Musgrave again an intense dislike of him and his wounding silence formed itself in her thoughts.

She resented the strength and independence of the man, seeing each passing day as a beaten-down barrier in the forces of her defence. Their relations had developed into a state of silent siege. She could feel the pressure of him, although she never saw him, and knew that mentally he was waging war on her. She was sure he was thinking of her as much as she thought of him, but an eternal vanity of woman hungered to have those

MAC SMELLS NEWS

thoughts of his concreted into shape, made tangible, written to her that she could read and linger over them, or whispered into her ear that she might listen to their music. Because he denied her their pleasure, she hated him—and loved him the more.

It was she who capitulated. She wrote to him, pretending she was afraid that his long silence meant a serious illness. She hoped he was all right. She could have written easily and frankly to David Musgrave. It was in her to do so; but she penned her letter with difficulty, and was badly pleased with her attempt at a rapprochement. Between the passages of her artifice she wrote with sincerity of her pleasure in the flat; gave him the news of Paddy and Tom, and of the life of London; and revealed something of her inner loneliness. Then, the imp playing in her again, she hinted of a gay party at the seaside which she was to join, and emphasised that there would be cheery men, young men, likeable men. She drew a happy picture of bathing parties in the sunshine, motor rides in the moonlight, long lazy hours for flirting and chatter and doing nothing at all.

David Musgrave did not reply to her letter. He treated it as he had treated her lip-stick message. There came from him no indication that he had heard from her. She waited for two or three days, hoping; then hope died, and his silence moved in her a morose resentment. She had made the gesture and he had ignored it. She hated herself for having made it, and hated him for the strength of his position which gave him the power to hurt her.

She prepared to make efforts to forget him altogether. Obviously it was the only way to prevent him hurting her again. If he wanted to have nothing to do with her, she would see he was not troubled in future. And Mabel Warnham came to the rescue with the good news that Princess Sadrine would give Fay Sharon an audience

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

immediately. The period of waiting, of inactivity, was over. The job was on once more. It was up to her to get it completed and be off to the sea with her party.

She was to be at the House of Hope at ten o'clock in the evening, and the prospect of work took her thoughts from herself and quickened her interest in life again. She went into the office late in the afternoon and delighted Mac with the tale of her stroke of luck.

"Fine," he said. "You ought to get something out of this. Do you think we'll be able to have a story for to-morrow's paper?"

She was doubtful. The "confidences" were lengthy affairs, usually lasting an hour or two. It seemed a pity to spoil the story by running merely a hurried account of one audience when she might be able to get a stronger story out of subsequent enquiries or other "confidences."

Mac agreed, although he expressed his anxiety to "get the thing going" before a rival paper came out with it.

"Unless you land on something really big to-night," he said, "come in to-morrow afternoon and let me know how you get on. We may be able to do something with it then."

She dined with Dewar Temple, hurriedly because he was going to the first night of a new play at the Gaiety, but pleasantly because he was always good company. He remarked tactfully on her tired appearance.

"The holiday will do you good. It's overdue, I should say. You can do with a few weeks loafing." His expressive mouth softened, and his grey eyes were friendly. He looked safe, and a little solid, she thought. "I'd say you almost need someone to look after you, Fay."

"That's rather different from the usual," she said bitterly. "Don't you mean someone that *I* can look after? That's how it's usually put."

"Feeling off colour?" He was sympathetic.

MAC SMELLS NEWS

"Sorry to be a grump, Dee, but I am, rather. I'm gasping to get away from all this. I'm glad we've got it all fixed up. It will be wonderful after London." She added swiftly: "And I'm glad you're coming."

He shot her a quick, shy glance. "That's nice of you. I can hardly believe my own luck. I haven't seen much of you lately; not half as much as I would like."

She teased: "But look at all the wonderful women you meet in the theatre."

"I see so many people who are wonderful only on the stage that it's good to know one like you in everyday life."

He said it quietly, but she could discern an under-current of emotion in his voice. Surprised, she busied herself with her food without looking at him. She did not want to encourage Dewar Temple to change his rôle of friendly admirer.

When he had gone to the theatre she had still more than an hour to put in before her call on Princess Sadrine, and she spent the time impatiently, going back to the flat because she could think of nothing better to do. She tried to read, but failed. Paddy Raine came in and they turned on the gramophone and danced lazily together to a new fox-trot melody she had brought with her.

(ii)

It was still daylight when at last Fay Sharon went down and hailed a taxi to take her to the House of Hope, but the lamps had been lighted in the street, and a soft haze shrouded the West End.

There was little of mystery about the exterior of the house, but she received her first surprise when she pressed the bell and was admitted to the hall by a little Japanese who smiled to her.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

It was very quiet. No sound came from any other part of the house. There was nothing to indicate that other human beings had residence in it. They stood for a moment in an uncanny silence, the Japanese grinning amiably, and Fay had a desire to turn and speed back to the street. Then she was beckoned into the gloomy hall and she dispelled her fears and stepped forward.

The man waited for her, his hand on the handle of a door.

"Miss Fay Sharon?" he queried softly, and she nodded.

He pressed the door open and stood aside to let her enter. The room beyond was dimly lighted. For an instant she hung back, then she was in the room, and the Japanese was following closely. Without a word he led her to a chair which stood almost in the centre of the floor, and, only waiting to see that she seated herself, bowed silently and went out. As the door closed behind him she heard the sound of the key being turned in the lock.

She did not move, but took quick stock of her surroundings. The room was very small and contained little furniture. Her chair faced a heavy curtain hanging in long black folds from the ceiling. She guessed that it covered a window for there was no trace of any window on the other walls, but she could not see clearly. The light which came from the hanging electric lamp directly above her head was too faint to allow her to see much. She tried to move her chair so that her face would be out of its beam, but discovered that it was fastened to the floor. Obviously the chair was beneath the lamp for a purpose, and almost immediately the purpose was made clear.

A voice—gentle, musical—suddenly broke the silence, saying :

"Good evening, Miss Sharon."

MAC SMELLS NEWS

She started and stared. The black curtains had fallen apart. Seated in the opening was a shrouded figure with a white, half-veiled face looking toward her. She could not discern the features, but for a fleeting second she was aware of the shadowy mass that indicated Princess Sadrine; then the light above her own head grew steadily brighter, shining down into her face in a white blaze, and blinded by its brilliance she could see nothing of the other woman but a blurred outline.

She was too surprised to answer the greeting, but she knew that in the silent moments which followed the woman was regarding her intently. Fay Sharon felt at a disadvantage. The streaming light on her face killed all likelihood of her seeing the other, and with the passing of that possibility there passed the strength of her story. She had not imagined that the "confidence" would be so one-sided as this. Something of her disappointment showed in her face.

"You must not mind that," the voice said gently, replying to her thoughts. "It is necessary, but will be removed, if you are a confider after my heart. It is a necessary mystery to protect me against the merely curious. I get many here. And they are tiresome. Until I know you, you must be content to be treated as one of them. I am sorry, but you will understand."

Fay Sharon liked the voice. It was human, sympathetic, a little tired. It might have belonged to a woman of any age, or of any nationality. It was English, and yet not English—not English enough to be definitely English. The woman chanted, rather than talked. It was probably all part of the business. She began to see the difficult job she was engaged on if she could not persuade this woman to regard her as a confider "after her heart", and divulge a few of her own secrets while listening to Fay's.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

She made an effort to throw off her chagrin and talk naturally.

"I was a little surprised. The Countess of Warnham had hardly prepared me for this."

"My confidants reveal little. They are very loyal to me."

Fay, becoming accustomed to the glare in her face, tried to pierce the gloom beyond, but failed. The vague figure who spoke was effectively concealed.

"It was good of you to let me come to-night."

"Tell me your trouble."

Fay Sharon hesitated. Good journalist as she was learning to be, she had come unprepared. She had forgotten that it would be necessary for her to play a large part in the "confiding" business, and now saw her mistake. She should have had a carefully constructed tale, a human problem, that this woman would help her to solve. She had been too tired, and much too lazy to think of it. But lacking an imaginary problem, she was forced back on one that was real to her and very near her thoughts.

"I'm in love," she said.

It seemed to her that the Princess smiled in the gloom. No doubt there were many who, sitting in that chair, had said the same words.

"Yes? Unhappily, of course?"

"Very unhappily."

"The man does not love you?" There was a trace of weariness in the voice.

"In his way I think he does."

"Then? Is it so difficult?"

"He is married." The words stumbled out before she could stop them. She felt that this woman had sympathy and understanding. Suddenly she forgot the story she was after and became merely a credulous woman seeking advice, attracted for a moment by the

MAC SMELLS NEWS

mystery and power that seemed to be part of the other's life. She wanted, like millions of her sex, to peer into the unknown and see the future. She was one with the superstitious woman who creeps hopefully up a back-stair to have her hand read, or who, draining her cup of tea, looks longingly among the dregs for a message from heaven.

The voice said. "And his wife, of course, is the obstacle?"

"Yes—and no. It's not quite the ordinary story, Princess. I love the man, and he loves me, but his wife has little to do with it. She is—dead." A sudden fear that she was being too frank impelled her to tell the lie, but even as she said it she knew she was disbelieved.

The figure rustled impatiently in the gloom.

"The sitting will be ended, Miss Sharon, unless you can tell me the truth. Shall I ring?"

"No, please, please!" Panic because she had failed took possession of her. "I'll tell you everything quite truthfully. I'm sorry I said that. It's only because everything is so unusual, and you are unusual. I have never told anyone before, and I find it difficult to tell frankly what I am suffering."

There was a pause, and then the voice said, "I believe you. Tell me more."

Fay breathed deeply in relief.

"His wife is not dead. She's alive, but he hasn't lived with her for years, and she doesn't affect his life in the slightest. It's only that he says he will never marry again. And I believe him."

"Many men have said that."

"This man means it. I feel it. I'm convinced of it. It's hell."

"And you?"

"I want him. I believe I'm really in love with him now, although I haven't seen him for months. He wants

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

me, too. Or did. But he won't divorce his wife, and if he did, he wouldn't marry me. He's said so."

"He suffered in his marriage?"

"I should say damnably. But he says that has nothing to do with it. The reason he gives is that he's the type of man who must be a bachelor. His marriage only helped to show him that."

"All men are bachelors at heart. Surely you don't need to be told that it's we who make them change their minds."

"I know: I know." Speech was a relief to Fay Sharon. "But it is different with this man. I feel I'll never get him; he's too strong for me."

"And you can't fall in with his wishes?"

"No. At least, I don't want to. Not yet. Oh, you can't possibly understand."

"I understand many things."

"I beg your pardon." She gripped her hands tightly together, forgetting in the stress of her emotion that every movement under the electric lamp was noticed by the woman facing her. "I want to tell you everything. It is such a relief to talk to someone who understands. But my position is so difficult. I want the man, but I want him to marry me."

"Does that mean that you want marriage more than the man?"

"I want both."

"But if you can only have one—the one he wants?"

"I haven't faced that yet."

A hand reached out from the darkness and slipped into the pool of light and touched Fay Sharon's fingers. It was a cool, slender hand; beautiful and comforting. It went back into hiding before the girl could clasp it.

"How old are you?" the Princess asked.

"Twenty-seven."

MAC SMELLS NEWS

"Don't you think it is time you faced the problems of life which mean most?"

"I have tried to."

"But not succeeded. Have you been in love before?"

"Once, seriously; with a man who would have nothing to do with me. Many times in fun."

"But never enough to give yourself to a man?"

"I have wanted to. But something holds me back."

"I understand." The chanting voice was dreamy.

"You want a home and a husband and babies."

"Of course."

"Of course, you do. What woman does not? But what does a woman do when she cannot have the sweets of life?"

"That is my worry."

"And only you can remove it. You can live with the man, getting some of the things out of life that every woman wants; or you can be pure and noble and tread the lonely path to old age with only virtue as a poor reward. Either way you will be unhappy and unsatisfied."

"That's what I am afraid of."

"There is no other man?"

"Not now."

"And you are twenty-seven."

A silence fell between them.

"Many women win men by aloofness," the Princess said presently. "They build barriers around themselves, and the more they retreat from their pursuers, the more eager are the men to capture them. These women win by withholding. Some men, on the other hand," she added slowly, "are won by giving, not by withholding."

"You don't mean that this man would?"

"I know nothing about this man. I know that some men are moved strangely by the things that surrender to them, that pay tribute to their masculine greatness

by succumbing before the onslaught. Some men are generous in victory. More men than women, believe me. They are stirred to a tenderness for the victim of their own prodigious power. They hold out hands in friendship, often in love, to the people they have endeavoured to crush. Wise women down the ages have exploited this generosity of man to their own needs. They have appreciated that sometimes the giving demanded by man has been their own easiest way to receiving."

"I don't think many men are like that."

"More than you would believe."

"Have you known many, Princess?"

"I am here to ask questions, not to be asked them."

There was a trace of annoyance in the voice.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to be rude." Fay Sharon was surprised to hear her own apologetic note. The woman had a certain imperious manner that went well with her title.

"What do you want me to do, Miss Sharon?"

Fay thought quickly. It was necessary that she should be able to come to see Princess Sadrine again. She did not want her problem, pressing as it was from her own point of view, disposed of at one sitting.

"Advise me, Princess," she answered humbly. "Tell me what to do and I will do it, and I will let you know what happens. I must have someone to confide in. The thing is terribly worrying."

"Because you will not face it. That is why. If I were in your position I would not hesitate. I should know what to do. My heart would guide me. Your head has failed. I can see that. You have tried to win things by cunning and cleverness. You *are* clever. And beautiful. And I should say you have tried hard and failed. All your beauty and all your skill have not brought you happiness." She paused, and then continued: "Life

MAC SMELLS NEWS

runs short. We spend precious time refusing what we want most, and at the end of it we look back and sigh for the opportunities that will never beckon to us again. The hours run away with the days; the heart runs away with the head; sometimes the head forgets the heart. Have you hope?"

Again the queer question.

"Sometimes," Fay replied frankly. "Only sometimes. I have hope that everything will come as I want it."

"Have you hope that you will get the man?"

"Yes."

"The sooner the better," the Princess said. "The best years are slipping away from you, the years that should be spent with a mate. You look tired. Do you work?"

"I write."

"Books? Novels?"

"Not yet, but I hope to."

"A poor recompense for lost things. The man?"

"He writes also."

"What is his name?"

For a second she hesitated. "David Musgrave."

"Thank you." Princess Sadrine paused. "Your answer has made me psychic. I believe I can see something of him."

A flutter of excitement quickened the beat of Fay Sharon's heart.

"You can *see* him?" she said breathlessly, peering round the other.

"Vaguely. Is he tall?"

"Yes, yes!"

"And handsome. I can see his face above your head."

Instinctively Fay looked up and then brought her eyes down again.

"By the expression in his eyes, he cares for you. He cares for you a great deal."

"I'm glad. So glad."

The Princess said, "He does not hate his wife. But the memory of her hurts. Why is that?"

"She was a woman who let him down badly when he was decent enough to stand by her."

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

"Ah, how you love him, to believe unquestioningly."

Fay said indignantly, "I believe him, not because I love him, but because he's the kind of man who would tell the truth."

"Was she unfaithful to him?"

"Yes."

"I can feel that. It is in the air. She was the type of woman who could not be faithful. A courtesan at heart. Why did he not divorce her?"

"He said it was no use doing that. As he never wanted to marry again, why bother to divorce her? That was his attitude."

"You were eager to get him to divorce her?"

"Naturally."

"Naturally. I would in your position. Any woman would. And he left her then?"

"He hasn't seen her for years. They have never lived together for years. For all practical purposes they are divorced. Only—he isn't."

"I understand how you feel. You are shut out of Eden. Let me think for a minute or two."

It was quiet while Fay waited. The minutes sped past and no sign came from the shadow beyond the gleam of light. But it did not move. The Princess was still there, thinking, watching . . . watching the still figure in the glow.

For the first time since the beginning of the interview, Fay Sharon found it possible to analyse her sensations and review her position. Almost with a shock she re-

membered she was visiting the woman in a professional capacity and that she was out on a story.

Undoubtedly Princess Sadrine had exceptional power and persuasion. She had persuaded Fay into accepting seriously an extravagant piece of nonsense. She had surrounded with mystery and eeriness an interview which might as easily have taken place either in daylight or lamplight. There was no reason why this woman should sit in darkness while her victim, like a prisoner, writhed under a searchlight. She had persuaded Fay to forget she was a journalist in being an ordinary woman suffering from love.

As she sat waiting for the Princess to speak again she admitted that all the honours so far lay with the other. She had discovered nothing about her; she was not likely to discover anything if the other interviews were to be like the first. She had been forced to give information to the Princess that she would have given to no other person; and while the mystery woman had shown that she knew the world very well, and had adroitly put some leading questions about David's appearance, she had done little to justify her reputation.

But Fay could easily imagine her performance impressing the women of Mayfair. It was novel and even stimulating. It provided a new thrill and was the type of entertainment that would bluff many women. There was in it a suggestion that Princess Sadrine had amazing powers and divine wisdom. It was like a play with the women "confiders" taking part instead of merely watching from the auditorium, and that was one of its chief attractions.

Fay had been carried away by it herself, but this interlude—a bad mistake on the Princess's part, she felt; it would have been much better to sustain the interest of the "confider" by having no break—this interlude brought her back to everyday life, and took her away

from the cloaked and veiled figure outside the radius of the electric glow. A sense of shame that she had lent herself to the farce and momentarily believed in it compelled her to close her eyes in case the other would read her thoughts.

But undoubtedly there was a colourful story to be got out of a vivid description of this tomfoolery that society women were encouraging by their support. The wording of it began to form itself in her mind as she sat waiting. If she could not actually expose the woman as an imposter she could pour a stream of ridicule upon her and her House of Hope. The fact that she had been temporarily impressed lent indignation to Fay as she planned her tale.

"I feel you have grown hostile," the Princess said, breaking the silence, and Fay opened her eyes in astonishment. The woman certainly could penetrate one's thoughts. "Have you?"

"Not hostile," Fay answered hastily. "Sceptical. It is so hard to believe that anyone can help me out of the awkward position I am in."

"Then why did you want to come to me?"

"Because I think *you* can help me."

"I can't. Your biggest obstacle is lack of hope. That, and the failure to realise that you alone can help yourself."

"But I need guidance."

"I think not." The voice became abrupt and cold. "If you cannot see that you are best fitted to solve this problem, then no one can ever show you the way out. I shall not see you again. It would be a waste of my time and yours."

Fay Sharon sat silent.

"You are not sincere, Miss Sharon. I feel it. Did the Countess of Warnham instruct you about the offering for my services?"

MAC SMELLS NEWS

Fay nodded, interest reawakening at this mention of payment.

"Then please make it in the way she directed."

Fay fumbled in her bag and produced the envelope containing the twenty folded treasury notes that Mabel Warnham had warned her about on the telephone. As she took it from the bag and closed the clasp with a snap she was suddenly seized with a bold idea. The woman obviously meant what she said. There would be no further "confidences" between her and Fay Sharon and there would be no other opportunity for Fay to pry into her affairs.

If she was to find out anything about Princess Sadrine this was the moment to find it out. Never again, probably, would their hands meet. If she was to see the woman this was the opportunity to grab her hand as she took the money, pull her forward into the light, and tear the veil from her face.

She hung back for a moment, stilling the rapid beat of her heart, to say: "I am sorry you should take this attitude, Princess. I am quite sincere. I do want your help and guidance in this matter. It means a lot to me. Do believe me."

"And I have indicated the way along which you should go. Beyond that I cannot help you. We shall not meet again."

"But Princess. . . ."

"The confidence has lasted longer than I wish."

Fay said humbly, "Thank you. I am so sorry," and reached out her hand with the packet of money.

The slim white hand moved forward once more into the pool of light. Fay Sharon stared at it, fascinated. The long tapering fingers closed on the envelope. The girl came swiftly to life. Her left arm swept rapidly outwards, and her hand closed tightly on the other's elbow. At the same moment she released her hold on

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

the money, clutched the slim hand, and wrenched it toward her.

There was a gasp from the darkness. For a tense moment Fay exerted all her strength; but the other had sensed her intention and had prepared against it, and silently they battled with each other. Then the free hand of the Princess came into play. It pounced out, clenched, and dealt a sharp blow across Fay's knuckles. Her grip slackened. The clenched fist rose again and repeated the blow. At the same moment Fay became aware of another presence behind her in the room. Two brown hands came over her shoulders and tightened upon her wrists. She was lifted forcibly back into her chair, and the free hand of the Princess disappeared again into the darkness.

Panting, Fay looked up. The face of the little Japanese grinned coldly back at her. He released his hold and stepped out of the radius of the light. Angry and annoyed at her failure, she brought her eyes down to face the shadow that was Princess Sadrine. She could hear her breathing deeply and quickly, and was glad she had upset some of the mystery and insolence that seemed to be part of the other woman.

No one spoke. The Princess recovered slowly. The Japanese lurked in the background. Fay, jubilant and disappointed at the same time, opened her handbag and peered into the tiny mirror. Then calmly she took out her puff and powdered her nose. This done, she slipped the top off her lip-stick and touched her lips with red. Then she closed the bag and settled herself comfortably in the chair. But her heart was beating faster than usual.

"You did not need the physical exercise," the Princess said acidly, at last. "I had not intended that you should leave the House of Hope entirely hopeless."

Fay did not answer. At an unseen signal from the shadow the Japanese leaned forward into the light and picked up the fallen money from the floor. Fay smiled

MAC SMELLS NEWS

as he put it into his pocket and again disappeared. There was something irresistibly funny to her in this remembrance of the essentials of the business.

"Don't laugh," the Princess said. "Your problem is one for tears, not laughter. I do not know who you are. We have never spoken to each other before this evening. We may never meet again. But our lives have touched and will touch at many points in the future."

Fay smiled again, sceptical of this return to the chanting tone of the mystery "confidences." Evidently the woman meant to continue the pose.

"You don't believe me? That is a pity. Sometimes it is the most impossible that is the most possible. Chance has sent you here to-night, and chance takes you away again, never to return. And chance plays many strange tricks. I am tempted to grant you an especial favour to-night."

"That is very kind of you," Fay said with irony.

"It is not a kindness. It is a sudden caprice. It is merely that I believe a young woman should not go through life without an occasional surprise. Or an occasional reminder."

As she spoke Fay Sharon was seized with a vague uneasiness, a disturbing premonition. There was in the woman's voice a vibrant malice.

Suddenly the light above her face was switched off. She sat motionless in the chair, her blood cold, steeled against any possibility. Her first fear was of physical injury, but reason came to her aid and vanquished it. It was impossible that in this house in the heart of London harm could come to her either from this woman or her Japanese servant.

But an icy shiver ran through her. She could feel her body tremble in suspense. If there was movement in the dark she could not hear it. The room was still. The whole house seemed to be a place of deathly silence.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Then the Princess laughed outright, and Fay felt a queer relief that she was still in the room beside her.

"I do not want to frighten you. Only to surprise you," she said. "You have never heard my voice before?"

Fay answered definitely, "Never."

"But you may have seen my face?"

A pale gleam of light broke the darkness. It came from a lamp somewhere in the direction of the black curtains, just above the head of the speaking shadow that had been the Princess throughout the interview. It grew brighter, but never attained brightness, and shone down on the upturned face of the woman who called herself Princess Sadrine.

She was looking upward toward the pale gleam, and there was in her eyes a challenging mockery that struck a chord of memory in Fay Sharon. She was strikingly beautiful. Pale, oval-shaped face. Thinly-pencilled eyebrows. Long slits of dark eyes. Black hair clinging closely to the head. And the strangest mouth. Not thin and hard and cynical in harmony with the rest of the face, but small and full and vividly red—like a red ripe fruit caught up in invisible lips.

As she looked, Fay Sharon caught her breath sharply, painfully. Her memory flashed back, and she could hear the band playing in the God Bug. She listened to the chatter of Tom and Paddy and David. And she saw the eyes of David Musgrave grow strained and unhappy as he looked into the face of a woman at another table. A beautiful face, with the strangest mouth: like a red ripe fruit caught up in invisible lips.

The face of Princess Sadrine.

For a full minute Fay stared at the mocking face, her heart a strange fire of battling emotions. Impossible to believe that this woman was David's wife; and yet im-

possible for it to be otherwise. There could be no two faces so strikingly similar.

The woman knew. She had seen Fay that night in the night club, dancing with David, happy with David; and now she had listened to her confession that she loved David. The humiliation of her position stung Fay Sharon and she longed to strike the beautiful face as it smiled in front of her. A deep loathing that David Musgrave's wife should be this cheap imposter twisted her lip into a sneer, and the woman who called herself Princess Sadrine saw it and laughed.

The dim light went out. The lamp above Fay's head was switched on, and she was helped to her feet by the grinning servant. She stood bewildered. The black curtains were in place, but the woman had vanished. The house was silent. Before she had recovered from her shock of surprise, the Japanese had guided her through the hall to the outer door. He bowed as he opened it, and she stumbled into the street.

CHAPTER XI

—AND FAY GETS IT

A MADNESS seized Fay Sharon as she walked through the London streets on her way to the flat. It was nearly midnight, and her first impulse was to telephone Mac and give him details of the story. Then she remembered that it needed more time to do it justice, and that at this late hour it would already have missed a few editions of the paper. If it was a story at all, it was one for every edition and not only for the final, and it would have to be very carefully prepared. Desire to get the best out of it, not desire to withhold publication, guided her steps away from the telephone box.

She refused a taxi, seeking time to compose her whirling thoughts; and as she walked, not noticing where she was going, anger and humiliation were forced out of her in the surge of bitter triumph that quickened her step into an intoxicating rhythm. She thought first of the woman, the beautiful thing, calling herself a Princess, who had mocked and hurt her.

Fay laughed as she thought of the "Princess's" face when she read the story. She thought of the story she would write, words coming easily and vindictively. She would reveal that she was no Princess; she would give her real name; she would pepper with ridicule the silly "confidences" which were tricking Mayfair. She was maddeningly jealous of this woman who had possessed David and who seemed to be the obstacle in the way of her own happiness with him. Her one regret was that

AND FAY GETS IT

she could not mention anything of her sordid story that David had told her. That wouldn't be allowed by the paper, but other things would!

To expose Princess Sadrine it would be necessary to bring in David's name. That presented no difficulties. The dull resentment she had harboured since he had ignored her, blazed up. She hated him as she walked swiftly home, remembering that he could hurt her, and linking him with his wife in her humiliation. If David Musgrave cared to have this woman still as his wife, he would have to bear any stigma that became attached to her name. He could have avoided unpleasantness now by divorcing her years before. He ought to have done so! Because he had neglected his obvious duty was no reason why decent people coming upon the misdemeanours of his wife should hesitate to entangle his name. He might have known that such a woman was bound to fall foul of society sooner or later and he should have taken steps to keep himself outside any criticism or condemnation of her.

She pretended to be sorry for David, but she knew it was a pretence. She was glad he would be hurt. This wonderful opportunity that Fate had sent her to hurt him and the woman at one and the same time! He would hate to see his name in the newspaper. She could visualise his expression of pain as he read the account, the tired lines about the baffling mouth. He was so strong and self-sufficient! Well, he'd see if he was immune from hurt.

Wife of the well-known novelist! She could see the headlines, and wished she had the writing of those as well as the writing of the story! People would know—the story would have to make it quite clear—that David had no connection with the House of Hope, but his name would be mentioned. And in the tubes and 'buses people would say: "Yes, she's the wife of that novelist fellow."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Shouldn't be surprised if he had a hand in it!" Or, going to their businesses in trains and trams: "They say he hasn't lived with her for years. I'll bet he was on speaking terms with her when she counted the week's takings! She made about a thousand a week, it says! Would you believe it? These rich mugs!"

She walked on swiftly, emotion giving her a new strength. The langour assailing her had gone. In its place a thrill of excitement fired her blood. There was a spot of high colour against her cheek bones. She talked to herself as she walked, her lips moving rapidly. Now and again a homeward-bound pedestrian turned and stared after her.

At the corner of Jermyn Street she paused for a moment, feeling for her key. A man, top-hatted, moved up to her and whispered a greeting. She stared at him. Her eyes blazed. Something of what she was feeling against David Musgrave and the woman and all mankind in general released its hold on her, and she slapped his face and hurried on.

The action brought back some of her sanity. Its madness was so apparent, that it steadied her. She had never slapped anyone's face before. It was a glorious thing to do, but a mad thing, and she realised this. For a red moment she wished it had been the face of Princess Sadrine, then she laughed shakily at the thought and slowed her pace as the flat came in sight.

She did not want Paddy to see her in such an excited state. That would lead to questioning, and questioning was what she was anxious to avoid. Why have to explain herself or justify herself to anyone—even Paddy? She knew Paddy would see things differently and would argue with her if she guessed what Fay was going to do with the story. She was in no mood for arguing with anyone.

Paddy Raine was just going to bed when she let herself

AND FAY GETS IT

in. She turned to greet Fay with a smile, but it froze on her lips when she saw the other's face.

"Fay, you're ill," she said anxiously, hurrying forward. "What's happened?"

"I'm all right. Tired a bit. That's all." She did not meet the younger girl's eyes.

"Tired! You look feverish." She took Fay's warm hand. "You *are* feverish. What in the world have you been doing?"

She pushed Fay into the most comfortable armchair, and knelt on the floor and slipped off her shoes. A weight of weariness descended on the older girl as she sank into the chair. She had been keyed up beyond the limits of her waning strength, and in the reaction she felt very weak. Her nerves were on edge. She closed her eyes. A mighty langour changed her legs and arms into heavy dead things. Paddy, she knew, was anxiously hovering over her. It would never do to crack up at this stage. She must keep going, if only for another twenty-four hours. To-morrow she could collapse if she wanted to, but not to-night.

She made an effort, opened her eyes, and smiled up at Paddy's strained face.

"I'm all right now, Puss-in-Boots," she laughed. "It's the heat lately, and the job. I'll be O.K. to-morrow, and I think I'll buzz off a little earlier than I meant to on that holiday."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Absolutely. I'm just terribly leg-weary. I'd like to lie in this chair for ever, but I've got a story to write."

"To-night?"

"To-night."

Paddy protested, "Fay, don't be an ass. Whatever the story is, it needn't be written until to-morrow. You can't possibly do anything with it to-night, so why not sleep on it and tackle it in the morning when you're all

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

fresh and fit again? It will be a much better story then. *You* know that."

Fay said wearily, "You tempt me, damn you!"

Paddy had been standing in a shimmering nightdress. Now she pulled a dressing-gown about her and moved toward the kitchen.

"Just rest there and I'll get you something that will make you feel better in a couple of shakes," she called back over her shoulder. "And what about a bath?"

Fay sighed, "I haven't the energy," although the thought of it was pleasant.

"I'll get it ready for you. Don't move just now. I'll let you know when it's prepared."

A touch of her old self came to life in Fay as she replied lazily, "Paddy, you most certainly ought to be measured for wings. You'll need them one day." But the other had gone, and she lay back, her eyes closed, feeling better as the minutes passed.

Before Paddy returned she got up and looked at herself in the mirror.

"I am a mess," she murmured, pushing the damp golden hair back from her forehead, and wondering at her pallor and the spot of red on each cheek. Her face looked thinner: *was* thinner. Weariness had purpled a pale furrow under each eye. "I'm getting frightfully passé," she thought, and went back to the armchair to rest. This wasn't the night to think about her own shortcomings. It was the night to prepare for the debacle of the other. To-morrow with its new strength and determination would see the story written.

Paddy returned while she was still brooding.

"Your bath is ready, milady," she lisped. "And I've got something nice for you as soon as you've had it."

She looked up gratefully, and for the first time in months really noticed the girl who shared her daily life. They had not seen much of each other during the busy

AND FAY GETS IT

time when Fay had been learning the bitter side of the newspaper game, and the coming of proficiency had brought to Fay additional interests and engagements which had taken her away from the flat. With Paddy at her office all day, and Fay on the job in the evenings, their life had been a scrambled affair, an endless coming and going, a series of brief "Cheerios" and casual "Hello, darlings." Yet it had developed and cemented their queer friendship.

Now, looking at her in this new rôle of nurse that Paddy had adopted, she was struck with the marked appropriateness of it. It fitted her well. Paddy looked down on her charge, and all the fairyness had gone out of her. She was essentially capable of mothering. There was in the softness of her sympathy that curious hardness of determination that marches with knowing womanhood. Her eyes, glowingly black, were tender; but there was the light of a strong will behind them which would insist on obedience. She had become suddenly the mother, and because life had given her so few previous opportunities of filling the rôle, she was engagingly shy as she went about its duties. It came to Fay as she looked that the girl was marked out for this; it was the inevitable she could not escape. She was the type that men wanted and married. Paddy would never have to make an effort to squeeze what she wanted out of life.

Fay regarded her steadily, wondering at many things, and Paddy read something of her thoughts, and flushed. She leaned over impulsively and their cheeks touched for an instant. Then Fay got up wearily and went toward the bath.

"Angel," she said over her shoulder.

"Fathead!" Paddy answered cheerily.

Paddy seemed even to have grown more beautiful, she thought as she tested the water in her bath and thanked heaven the other girl had been generous with the bath

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

salts. The pinched wistfulness of her Club appearance had gone. She appeared to be happy and contented. Fay sighed and gave herself up to the soothing luxury of her bath.

When she went back, feeling considerably better, Paddy pushed a tray toward her and said, "Drink!"

But Fay stared at a photograph that lay face upward on the small table covered with books and papers.

"This must be Fate," she thought dazedly, still staring.

Paddy Raine followed her gaze, and brought her eyes back quickly.

"Sorry, darling," she said. "I meant to shove it out of the way before you came in to-night."

Fay did not take her eyes from the face. "Where did you get it?"

"In one of David's drawers. I was having a sort of spring cleaning to-night after you went out. You know how our stuff keeps growing, and I wanted more room for some of it. So I cleared out one of those drawers which we haven't invaded up to now, and this was among the junk."

It wasn't easy to look away from the photograph. She said, still gazing at it, "You know her, Paddy?"

"I didn't remember her at first. I knew I had seen the face somewhere before, and then it came back to me. That night at the Gold Bug with Tom and David. I just caught the least little glimpse of her then, but I remembered."

She added reluctantly: "You know, Fay, she's awfully beautiful."

"Isn't she." She brought her eyes round, and busied herself with the tray Paddy had given her.

"Coldly beautiful, of course," Paddy said loyally. "I'd say she hadn't much of a heart or anything like that."

Fay was silent.

AND FAY GETS IT

"I meant to put it out of the way before you got back."

"But why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just felt like that about it. I don't care much for it, and I thought you wouldn't."

"I think she's quite beautiful."

Fay was thinking: So he kept a photograph of her. It didn't matter that it was in an old drawer hidden among rubbish belonging to other days. He had kept it. Not torn it up angrily and watched it burn when he had thrown the parts on the fire, and felt gladly that something he hated had been destroyed. Not hacked it in pieces and stamped his foot upon that damnably cold face. Kept it. He must have cared. How he must have loved her at one time! Keeping the picture of the woman who had done him so much harm. It wasn't as if the picture had been overlooked. It couldn't have been. It had all happened years ago, and David must have moved about and changed his address many times since they parted. And changing meant packing bags and raking out possessions from old drawers. He'd had several chances of destroying the photograph. It must have popped itself into his notice time after time. But he had kept it. Probably looked at it when it turned up each time, and thought heaps of things about it and about the woman; but always kept it.

She reached out her hand and picked it up. The face was younger, less sophisticated, than that of Princess Sadrine. The eyes were not so narrowed, and the hair had been dressed in the style of the day when the photograph was taken. But the mouth was the same strange mouth, and the face was the same beautiful face.

It would look well with her story. It was a splendid picture for reproduction purposes. Her paper, thank heaven, could always be depended upon to make the best of a good-looking woman. It was the one thing her story had lacked. It must be Fate!

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

The blood warmed again in Fay Sharon as she thought of the woman. This photograph was a gift from heaven. It never occurred to her that she had no right to it, and that she was outraging every sense of decency in using the property of David Musgrave in such a way. The madness that had come to her on the walk back from Princess Sadrine's house still lingered. It fired her with a vindictive desire to hurt. *She* had been hurt. Why should she hesitate to hurt in turn? Besides, this was a minor factor in the affair. She was going to tell the story in any case, so why should she not use a photograph of the principal character in it? It was good journalism: it was her job. She simply had to do it.

"What were you going to do with it, Paddy?"

"Oh, just chuck it out of sight somewhere."

Fay said, "All right. Leave it with me. I'll do something with it. And now I'm off to bed. Coming?"

But she did not sleep well. Her brain was too busy with her story to allow sleep to disturb its pleasant activity. Thoughts tumbled after each other, phrases leapt into printed life, headlines formed themselves in bold and damning array before her opened eyes. She stared into the darkness and longed for morning; and when morning came she fell into a heavy, dreaming sleep, and woke only when Paddy, up and dressed, brought her a cup of tea before going off to her office.

Fay's head ached, and she resorted to aspirin. For some time she lay still, assembling her thoughts, gathering determination to make the effort to get out of bed. Then she rose, and in her mind's eye was still the tale of revenge.

CHAPTER XII

THE PAPER GOES TO PRESS

McADAM was busy that afternoon when Fay arrived at the office, and for some time she waited before she saw him, chatting with Hicks and Tom. Tom remarked on her tired appearance, and Hicks murmured something about gay nights and the high life, but she told them nothing about her news.

When finally she went in to see Mac she found him bending over an early evening paper spread out on his table, and sensed in the room a marked atmosphere of hostility toward herself. Mac's assistant, who usually turned to greet her with a cheery "Hallo, Miss Sharon," nodded briefly and said, "afternoon." Mac did not look up, but murmured something she could not catch, and went on with his scrutiny of the paper.

She bit her lip at the reception. It was chilling and baffling.

"I've got that story, Mac," she said.

"Oh?" There was sarcasm in his voice, and he did not raise his head. "Out of the *Evening Standard*, I suppose?"

"The *Evening Standard*?" She was completely mystified.

He lifted his head, and his eyes were cold in his hard face. "Yes. Haven't you seen their story?" He picked up his paper and handed it to her, his thumb against a heavy headline. "Is that the story you've got?"

Bewildered, she took the paper. Mac busied himself at his littered table. Her eye fell on the headline, and

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

she started in surprise. It read further, and in a moment she was deep in the evening paper's description of the House of Hope and Princess Sadrine. It was almost as if she had written the story herself, so vividly true was it to her own experience. The writer had obviously had a "confidence" with the Princess, and described at some length and with many humorous touches, the whole foolish business. It was an excellent description. It made good reading. But it had not the story behind the Princess that Fay Sharon had. It gave no names and no particulars of the woman. It suggested that the Princess was a mystery, but did not probe the mystery. It was the account Fay would have written if she had discovered nothing; if David Musgrave's wife had not revealed herself.

She folded the paper and replaced it on Mac's table. "They've got it all right, haven't they?" he said, meeting her eyes again.

She could feel his hostility. For the moment he hated her. He hated anyone who let him down, and allowed another paper—morning or evening, it did not matter—to get a story before he did. And a story he had been particularly keen on! That was almost unforgiveable. His assistant, a silent ally, sharing his hostility, gave her little attention. The story had been missed. She had fallen down on it.

"We can't do much on it now," Mac said. "They've got it pretty well covered there."

"I'm awfully sorry they got that first, Mac, but actually its publication might help us."

"I can't see it." He looked doubtful.

"I had a 'confidence' with the woman last night."

"I don't see that that helps much. The only thing we can do now is to expose the whole business—if there's anything left to expose. I've got a couple of fellows out on it. All the others will be on to the story now, but

THE PAPER GOES TO PRESS

the woman will be warned by this *Standard* story. We'll be lucky if we get anything." He looked at her almost pathetically. "I don't suppose you could get a picture of her?"

He asked the question mechanically, because he always asked the question. He did not believe for one mad moment that she had a picture.

Fay said, "Yes, I've got one."

His eyes steadied on her face, full of hope, but with a mental reservation somewhere behind them that this might be a catch. She was only fooling him. His assistant dropped the time-table he was fingering and stared at her.

"You've *got* one?"

She opened her bag, took out the photograph that Paddy had found the previous evening, and handed it across the table.

Mac ate it with his eyes. "My God, she's a beauty! Is this her?"

Fay nodded.

"*Sure?*"

She laughed and nodded again.

"You don't happen to know who she is, do you?" he asked.

"Yes. I've got the whole story."

He put both his hands deep into his pockets, and came round the table beside her. "Go ahead," he said quietly, "Who is she?"

"The wife of David Musgrave."

"David Musgrave? The novelist?"

"Yes." She took the story out of her bag and handed it to him. "Here's the dope. It was written, naturally, before I read this *Evening Standard* story, and may have to be altered a bit in consequence, but it's all there. I think it's pretty good, Mac."

He did not hear her. His eyes were running rapidly

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

over the pages before she had stopped speaking. Half-way through he looked up and said to his assistant, "Ask Chadleigh to come in and have a look at this, Smith," then buried himself in it again.

"What do you think of this, Chad?" he asked the chief sub-editor, when he appeared. "It's our follow-up on the Princess Sadrine story that the *Standard* has."

He sat down while the other read, his eyes on Fay Sharon's face, and although she did not know what he was thinking, she knew he was pleased. She watched the sceptical face of the pessimistic Chadleigh as he read.

"A damned dangerous story," he declared, removing his black-rimmed glasses and addressing Mac. "Is it true?"

"Absolutely. This is her picture."

Chadleigh picked it up, and as he visualised its effect on the make-up of his main news page, his doubt softened.

"She's a peach," he murmured, "but we've got to be absolutely sure about this story, Mac. It's dangerous if we're not sure of our facts. A real hefty libel. Where did it come from?"

Mac nodded at Fay, and Chadleigh regarded her silently. They had never seen much of each other, but he had always remembered her as the woman who wrote the "damned puff" paragraph about the Countess of Warnham's ball; and as the man who wanted every inch of news in his pages to be interesting news, he disliked anyone who wasted precious space.

"It's absolutely safe," she said quietly. "I happen to know both the woman and her husband. He's got no connection with the Princess Sadrine business, of course, and that's made quite clear."

"But I don't like dragging in his name unless we're absolutely sure she's his wife. You're sure she is?"

"Absolutely certain. He hasn't lived with her for

THE PAPER GOES TO PRESS

years. There's an even more interesting story if it could be told."

"That's true," Mac put in. "I've heard that rumour before. Mysterious chap, Musgrave; not much known about him. But he's a fairly well-known name, and the thing's got good news value if it brings him in. He was a best seller last year."

"You could put your Paris man on to him, Mac," Fay suggested, "and see what he can get out of him about this. I don't suppose David Musgrave knows a thing about it, though."

"He lives in Paris? Got his address?"

She nodded and wrote it down for him, and over her bowed head the eyes of the men met and exchanged an understanding look.

"You've covered this story in great style, Fay," Mac praised.

"I was lucky. I happen to know Musgrave quite well. And I have met his wife before. It was just luck."

Chadleigh said again, "You're quite sure of your facts? It's the very story we want to follow up with, but, my God, if it's a let down! I think I'll show it to the old man himself, Mac. I'm a bit doubtful about it. What do you think?"

"By all means. But let him know that it comes from one of our best men. And say I'm convinced it's safe."

"I'll take the photograph with me," Chadleigh said. "We might as well be getting a block made of the thing just in case it's to be used."

"And I'll get on the phone to Paris," Mac said. "We want this covered from every angle if we're going to make something of it. Let's know quickly what the old man says."

It was not often that a story had to be shown to the editor before it had been set up in type; Chadleigh could usually be depended upon to do any necessary "killing."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Fay, realising the element of doubt and danger attached to her story, began to fear it would not be printed. She sat in Mac's room waiting for the decision, and as she saw her revenge gradually slipping out of her grasp, she prayed that the editor would be influenced in some mysterious way and insist on running the story. She tried to *will* him into agreeing to publish, concentrating all her mental forces on the effort, and looking up she saw Mac watching her.

"You've done pretty well on this job," he said quickly to ease her embarrassment. "But you look all in."

"If you don't mind, Mac, I think I'll buzz off on my holiday to-morrow instead of waiting till next week. I'm really played-out and can do with a decent rest."

She passed a hand across her white forehead.

"Do," he urged. His voice was sympathetic. "Slip away to-night if you like. I know what the job is like at first, and you've had a pretty stiff innings. But leave me your address in case you're wanted on this business again. Where are you going?"

"North Berwick. The Marine Hotel."

"Expensive spot, isn't it?"

"A bit, but I feel like it. I'm 'blueing' all my savings on it. A party of us are going up. Dewar Temple's one. I wonder if he'll be able to come away to-morrow?"

"He's more or less his own boss. No reason why he shouldn't. I expect he can fix that all right if he arranges for his usual deputy to cover his theatre stuff." Mac spoke carelessly. "Wish I were coming with you. But two of you out of the office at one time is enough. D'you know the place?"

"North Berwick? No. I've never even been to Scotland before."

"Never been to Scotland!" It was the first time she had seen him shocked. News of wars and disasters, of murders and sudden deaths, of political scandals and

THE PAPER GOES TO PRESS

international 'incidents', passed through his hands daily and left him unmoved. The news that Fay Sharon had never been to Scotland stirred him in a strange way. "God! That's funny!"

"But I know I'll love it," she put in hastily.

"Of course you will!" His eyes grew dreamy. "When I was a youngster I worked in Edinburgh and used to cycle down to North Berwick every week-end. There was great bathing in those days." Then the thought of his paper came uppermost. "If you come across anything while you're there—anything that makes a story that won't be covered in the usual way—see that you send it along. There are bound to be some interesting people there. You're a bit early in the year for the Society crowd, but there's sure to be somebody around worth a story."

She said fiercely, "Mac, do you expect me to look out for stuff while I'm on holiday?"

"I don't expect you to *miss* it," he said tersely. "You needn't look out for it, but if you come across it you've got to let me have it. Holiday! There's no holiday in this game." Then he saw her pale face, and finished abruptly: "Can't you see I'm only pulling your leg?"

But she knew he had been serious. She looked at him, wide-eyed. All his thought, all his life, was concentrated on the paper. He could not see her holiday without seeing also its possibilities for news. Behind him all the time was the paper, *his* paper; and in serving it so faithfully, it seemed to her, he had of necessity lost something of his own entity. There was tragedy in it. To her woman's eyes it was pathetic.

She knew little of Mac, and nothing at all of any life he lived apart from this life he led in his office. He must have a home somewhere; probably a wife and children. She did not know, but she knew that they were bound to have a thin time. This glimpse of him, years before,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

cycling to North Berwick and plunging into the sea in all the joyous vigour of youth, exchanging his happiness for the hard dream of a successful life in a distant London newspaper grind, struck her with sadness. He could only see North Berwick now as a source of news. Already the Princess Sadrine story was forgotten. He had got it. Now for the next story! The paper lived only for a day, only for an hour or two. It had to be fed. To-morrow had to be thought of, and the to-morrow after that; and an endless succession of to-morrows stretching wearily towards a distant horizon.

What was the horizon? What was Mac's horizon? What had he dreamed, and to what place was he travelling? Was his office life the actual end of his dreams? Maybe he was living his dream now.

"Mac," she said suddenly, "it would do you good to come with us. I'd love to have you there."

"I'd love to come." He looked round the office. She knew he was thinking that no one during his absence would put the same heart and devotion into the work. He wouldn't be happy away from it. All the time he would worry; wonder if things were all right; miss that contact with men and things and whirling world events that was the breath of life to him. "I would like to come," he was murmuring again, and broke off to say hurriedly to Smith: "You *did* put that call in for Paris, didn't you?"

Chadleigh came back.

"It's O.K." he said, smiling to her. "The old man's for it. You're in luck. He actually had heard of the woman himself. One of his friends had mentioned her to him, and he was just going to put us on to the story. A good bit of work, he says."

Mac said: "You'll get the Musgrave end of it later to-night, Chad. I'll send it into you as soon as we get anything. You running a picture of Musgrave himself?"

THE PAPER GOES TO PRESS

"Sure."

Fay Sharon said quickly, "Not of David Musgrave?"

"Of course. Both of them."

She had not thought of that. And yet it was the natural thing to do.

Chadleigh turned away, her copy in his hand. In a few minutes one of his sub-editors would be going through it, cutting out parts here, inserting paragraphs there, biting the end of his thick black pencil as he thought out the best headlines for it. Then it would go back to Chadleigh who would skim over it swiftly and send it to the "comps" to be set up in type. Soon afterwards the printed galley-proof would come in among a sheaf of others; the blocks of David Musgrave and his wife would be finished and mounted and kept ready upstairs for their position on the page; the tense activity of the office would become intensified as press-time for the first edition approached; upstairs the news pages would be made up, quickly, silently, skilfully, with anxious men glancing at the big clock every few minutes so that the pages would go away in time for the edition to catch the trains; there would be an increased running in and out of men, and Chadleigh would come up at the last moment to make a correction just as a page was going; a softly-swearing overseer would protest, "This page is two minutes late now; for God's sake get a move on"; the last page with the latest news would be put in and the sweating makers-up would let their hands drop to their sides in relief; in a few minutes the casts would be made and fitted on the machines in the basement; and presently the deep roar of printing would send its comforting hum through the whole building.

They would be printing the story of Princess Sadrine with its mention and picture of David Musgrave; and the sub-editors, hearing the hum while already they were preparing material for the next edition, would sigh

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

because the process of birth was in operation once more.

As Chadleigh closed the door behind him, realisation of her action came to Fay Sharon, beating in upon her with devastating force. She had done this to David! David, who had never injured her or deliberately hurt her. Her hurt at his hands had been of her own making. She thought of the flat, and remembered for the first time for many weeks that it was David's flat. A flash of intuition suddenly brought it to her that David had stayed away from it, perhaps, because he did not want to disturb Paddy and her while they were there.

She saw her offence. The printed newspaper would show it to others. She had thrown away her claim to David's friendship. Chadleigh, as he walked out of the room, took with him all that she might ever have been to David. It seemed to her that he took everything she might have had in life. And she had given it away, thrown it away.

A wild desire to call him back, to wrench the wretched copy from his hand and tear it in pieces, stirred her to action. She took a step forward. The telephone bell jangled harshly.

"Paris on the line," Smith said, and Mac moved to the receiver.

Limpness overcame Fay Sharon. "I'm going, Mac," she said, before he started speaking.

"Cheerio," he answered absent-mindedly, eager to give his instructions into the mouthpiece. "I hope you have a jolly holiday."

CHAPTER XIII

WISDOM IN THE MORNING

(i)

SHE was up early next morning. She had seen Dewar Temple after leaving the office the night before, and he had made arrangements to go off with her that morning. They were travelling by road to Scotland, making a two-day journey. He was bringing round his car at ten o'clock.

She breakfasted with Paddy, hiding the copy of her own newspaper that ordinarily Paddy, out of loyalty, bought and read every day. She had glanced hastily at the headlines of her story. They were worse even than she had feared, and she thrust the paper beneath a cushion while the other girl was having her bath. It was a wonderfully sunny morning.

"It will be marvellous going by road," Paddy said enviously. "I wish I were coming, Fay. But you deserve a good time."

"Do I?" She was standing by the telephone, her back to her friend.

"You do. You've worked like the devil lately. What are you going to do now—telephone someone?"

"Oh, no." She did not want Paddy to see her jamming the bell with a wad of paper so that it would not ring. She was afraid Tom would ring her up, and she dreaded to speak to him, hoping she would get away from the flat before either Paddy or Tom could have an opportunity of talking about the story.

But Tom did not trouble to ring. He came to the

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

flat himself while they were still at breakfast. In his hand was a copy of the paper, folded at the story, and on his face an expression of intense disgust. Paddy let him in, but he brushed past her and confronted his sister.

He stood gazing at her unbelievably, and the beat of her heart grew quicker as she saw his face. She rose from the table so that her eyes would be level with his: she felt overpowered while she had to look up at him. Paddy came in behind him, and stopped short in confusion, shocked at the attitude of hostility that marked the other two.

"They said in the office last night that you did this," Tom said pointing to the story and crumpling the paper up and throwing it from him. "Did you?"

To still the flutter in her breast, she replied, "I can't very well say, if you won't let me see what it is."

Deliberately calm, he picked up the paper, smoothed out the folds, and handed it to her. "You'd better read it, too, Paddy," he said, "if you haven't already seen it. It's good."

Paddy came round to her while she glanced at the page, and slipped her arm comfortingly round her waist. Fay needed the support and appreciated it. But in a minute the arm was withdrawn. Fay went on reading.

The story ran to some length. It had been improved by the sub who had handled it in the office. With its bold headlines, double-column "intro", and two pictures, it had an important and arresting place on the page. She skimmed it quickly herself, and she could hear the quick breathing of the girl at her side as she took in its import. The paper had succeeded in interviewing David in Paris, but he had not been very helpful, simply stating that he had not seen his wife for several years.

The girls fell apart as Paddy came to the end of the

column. She gazed at Fay with something like horror in her eyes, but she did not speak.

"Well?" Tom said again. "Did you?"

"Yes, I did." She tossed the paper on to a chair.

"Why?"

She was frightened at his fierce tone, but answered defiantly, "Because I was sent on the story and was lucky enough to get it."

"Did you have to drag David into it?"

"Well, I discovered who the woman was. I couldn't very well reveal her identity without mentioning David."

"You couldn't?"

"How could I?"

They glared at each other, Tom hating her, Fay hating herself. She hoped Paddy would say nothing about the picture and its theft. Her offence was already bad enough in the eyes of Tom without an added misdemeanour to fan the flame of his anger. Paddy caught the thought, and showed by her expression that she understood, but said nothing.

"God, Fay, it's damnable," Tom said tensely. "Don't you see that? Can't you see that you've behaved like an absolute rotter? It's the lowest thing I've ever heard of."

She did not try to defend herself. She agreed with her brother, but a cold stubbornness prevented her revealing herself. She would have liked to take him into her confidence and confess how miserable she was about the wretched business. She would have liked even to delve deep under the surface of things as they appeared to him and shown him the causes that had produced the consequences. But he was a man, and would not fully understand. It was to Paddy she should have unburdened herself—Paddy who had wanted to do "something desperate" herself; Paddy, who pondered over "repressions" and their effects on human conduct.

Paddy might have understood that one could do something desperate in a different way, in a hate way instead of a love way, and might dimly have seen that the same cause might produce different reactions. But if Paddy might have understood, Tom would not.

So, instead, she answered coldly: "Are you suggesting I should have let the paper down on the story?"

He rapped out angrily, "Drop that attitude, Fay. I could strike you when you talk like that. You know perfectly well what I mean. You didn't need to let the paper down, but there was no necessity to go as far as this. You know that. So don't pretend." He turned away and paced the floor, shooting hostile glances in her direction from time to time as he talked: "What I can't understand is *why* you did it. They could have knocked me down with a feather when they told me it was your story. I wouldn't believe it at first. Why in God's name should you do this to David? David! My friend. *Your* friend. After what he's done to make things ripping for you! If it had been some awful bounder who'd done you a dirty trick at some time and you were given the chance of getting your own back, or someone you didn't even know at all, then I could understand it. But David! Have you gone mad?" He stared at her bitterly.

She said, "Tom, will it hurt David so much?"

"Hurt him? Don't you know the man? He'd cut off his hand rather than have his name mentioned like this in a newspaper. To have it drawn into this rotten scandal—which he hadn't a damned thing to do with—will be like hell to David. He'll hate it. He's so decent, too; such a real chap"—his voice broke—"you must have been mad!"

"Perhaps I was," she said dully.

Paddy touched Tom on the arm.

"I don't like to butt in, but Fay's been terribly off colour lately, Tom. She was awfully ill last night."

Fay Sharon turned away and looked out of the window. She had never before experienced the sense of shame that comes to one when someone else makes excuses on one's behalf. She had always been able to take care of herself and answer for her own conduct, but life had never before thrown up a situation like this. And this was a time when she needed excuses to be made for her.

"I know she has, Paddy." She could hear Tom's voice. "But this isn't just being off colour. It isn't a lapse at all. It seems to me to have been done deliberately. It *was* done deliberately, wasn't it, Fay?"

"All my stories are done deliberately," she answered coldly, without moving from the window. She was wretchedly miserable and lonely. She had known that Tom would hate her when he saw the story. Everyone would hate her. She had done something that could never win her sympathy because it would never get her understanding.

He came up behind her. "Will you tell me why you did it?"

"No."

He swung her round, and their burning eyes met defiantly. They had had petty tiffs in the past, these two. Occasionally their eyes had met in anger. But more often they had met in deep friendship, and a mutual understanding; more often they had smiled, and teased and loved. They had been great pals. And now they looked like becoming for an indefinite period—just brother and sister.

"Tell me, Fay," he pleaded. "David will want to know."

"David?"

"Of course. We can't let the thing end here. We've go to explain to old David. Weren't you going to?"

She knew better than Tom that David Musgrave would understand the cause when he heard who had written the story. There was no need for explanation to David. And probably she would never again have the opportunity of talking to David.

"No, I wasn't going to tell him. Why should I?"

He stared at her, puzzled, the anger going out of his face.

"Why should you? Well, if you can't see that, I can't show you why." He broke off, and said coldly: "When will you be clearing out?"

"I'm going at ten o'clock. Dewar Temple is coming for me then in his car."

He said patiently, "I mean—when are you clearing out of the flat?"

"The flat?"

"Yes. Out of David's flat?"

She had not thought of that. But she saw what he was thinking.

"You surely don't mean to stay on here—in David's place—after the way you've treated him? I should have thought you wouldn't have the nerve to come back to it after last night."

She said spiritedly, "That's something between David and us."

He answered steadily, "No. It's an inevitable move on your part. David gave you this place as a friend. You've behaved in anything but a friendly way, and obviously the contract's finished. It's up to you to relieve the man of your presence." He finished acidly: "I don't suppose you'll wait till he has to tell you to go. You might save him that."

She felt that the world had tumbled about her ears. She had forgotten the flat, and yet, as Tom had said, she could not stay on in David's place. As if she had considered everything, she replied:

"I'm settling that as soon as I come back from Scotland."

"That's good. I think speed is indicated. I'm writing or wiring David to-day. Anything you wish me to say to him?"

"Nothing, thank you."

They looked at each other, both proud, both miserable underneath. Paddy had slipped quietly out to the bedroom and left them alone together.

"You won't be writing to him yourself?"

"No."

"Then I shall make my apologies for you. I think he'll take the whole affair badly, Fay."

"That's too bad."

"And that's all you have to say?"

He moved away from her. There was a hint of finality in the action. She watched him moodily.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand, Tom."

He wheeled round, "Haven't I always understood you? More than anyone?"

"Yes. But I don't think you would in this."

"I see. Well, I'm off. I shan't be seeing you for some time. I go on holiday the day you get back to the office, so we'll sort of pass in the night. I hope——"

"Don't hope I'll have a jolly holiday," she interrupted quickly. "I've been wished that already, and I don't think I could stand it again."

"I don't think you will have such a thrilling time," he said.

He went to the door. She hated to see him go like that, and to soften him back to friendliness she asked: "Where are you going for your holiday, Tom?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. I've got rather a new idea since this talk with you, but I'm not sure about it yet. I'll tell you later."

He went without looking round again, and Paddy

came out of the bedroom, her hat on, ready for the office. She slipped her arm round Fay's shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

"Darling," she said, "I'm like the marvellous girl in the story books who understands all."

The old touch of friendliness and burlesque in a world of cold hostility crumpled Fay Sharon. She could stand up to hate but not to friendliness. Shaken, she sat down and pressed her head against the soft breasts of Paddy Raine.

"I'm afraid it's waterworks, darling," she apologised heroically, and sobbed outright. It was a relief to cry, to bury her head in the bosom of someone who knew what it was all about. Paddy murmured soothing advice over her head, while she comfortingly rumped her hair.

"Forget about it, Fay. You're run down, and it's as much that as anything else. In a day or two, when you're at the seaside, you'll feel different. What you want to do is to get away from this and forget. It's not so difficult as it sounds. With Temple and Dicky Webster and the other people who are going with you, you'll have a wonderful time. Get into the sea a lot, and lie and sleep in the sun and be a regular beachcomber. It'll do you good. And for God's sake don't think about the flat or the future. When you come back in three weeks we'll talk it over and see what we're going to do. Don't worry. It'll be all right."

"You're a comfort, Paddy." She dabbed at her eyes. "And you've got a mothering way with you. Why don't you get a job at a maternity home?"

"I'd much rather be an inmate. Where's the fun in watching other people have a good time?"

She succeeded in drawing Fay's thoughts away from herself, and in a short time had softened the edge of her misery. When Dewar Temple arrived Paddy had gone

WISDOM IN THE MORNING

and Fay was waiting for him, locking her last suitcase. She bore no traces of the morning storm.

"I say," he enthused, "isn't it going to be great?"

She did not catch anything of his enthusiasm, but she pretended to. At any other time she would have been thrilled with the prospect of a road journey to Scotland.

"It's going to be wonderful, Dee."

He went down first to pile her bags, golf clubs, and tennis racket into the dicky seat of his big open two-seater, and she followed slowly, closing the door of the flat behind her without a backward glance. But in the street, with the sun shining down on a gleaming, smiling London, with the muffled roar of the traffic and the sudden remembrance that she was going away from it all, with the half-envious glances in her direction from pedestrians who guessed they were driving away from the heat and the din and the turmoil, a faint elation came to life within her.

The elation quickened to exhilaration as they threaded their way slowly through the Regent Street traffic and across Oxford Circus, purred soothingly past Golders Green, and crawled up the hill to Barnet behind a snorting traction engine. The exhilaration was almost recklessness, a recklessness born out of resentment at the knowledge of her own deficiencies. She hadn't been wholly to blame. Circumstances, she argued, had as much to do with the mess as anything. And it was done now, so what could she do? Life went on. The holiday stretched before her—a long, lazy holiday in the company of cheery friends. A time to forget. Well, she would damn well forget.

She was in that mood as they went up Barnet Hill. Temple looked at her. He could not get past the machine in front; a line of traffic coming down the hill kept him behind it.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"Feeling good?" he queried. He was frankly elated himself.

"I feel much better than I did. I wasn't feeling too good this morning, but now I'm ready for anything."

"That's fine. It's the only way to take a holiday, isn't it?"

"Rather."

He saw his way clear, accelerated, and shot past the chugging engine, waving to the driver as he did so.

"Only a few more minutes," he whispered exultingly.

She did not understand. "A few more minutes?"

"Yes. And we're finished with these blasted tram lines and away on the clear road. Let's give a cheer at the end of Barnet."

He was like a boy with a toy. She laughed aloud and shot him a quick look which, luckily for their safety, he did not see.

"Now!" he commanded.

They were at the end of the street. The road to St. Albans branched left. They were going straight on to Hatfield and the mystery places away beyond Hatfield. A yellow AA sign said thrillingly, "Stamford 77." It did not believe anyone wanted to go farther from London than that. Well, they'd show it! "Hip, hip—" said Temple, and they yelled the "Hurrah!" together, spluttering with laughter. A couple of workmen gazed blankly after them. They waved back.

Temple's foot went down on the accelerator and the car, moving beautifully, shot along the clear road. Fay watched the speed indicator jump from 30 to 35. She turned away for a moment and it had gone to 45 when she looked again. A minute afterwards it was shivering between 55 and 60. They went "SLOW THROUGH POTTERS BAR" at forty, Temple chortling: "Next stop Stamford. Sorry we can't buy any new-laid eggs to-day, madam."

WISDOM IN THE MORNING

He was a joyous companion. She had never seen him in such a mood before; had not known he could reveal such a side of himself. She had always felt that she knew him fairly well. He was to be relied upon. He smiled less frequently than any of the men with whom she was friendly, and his seriousness had suggested a certain quality of strength to her. Now he was revealing a side of his character that was entirely new, and one that seemed to fit him as perfectly as the other.

One was always learning new things about people. It was a queer life. She thought of Dewar Temple as she had seen him most, sitting beside her in the stalls at a new play, decently dressed, serious, critical, making funny little cynical remarks about the audience rather than about the players, the least bit anxious that the play end in good time to let him get a decent story to his newspaper before it went to press. He had seemed entirely in his element; he and all the other serious critics just like him. The odd thought struck her that perhaps those other newspaper critics also surprised their friends with their off-duty conduct. Perhaps Hannen Swaffer, resting from his labours to save the English stage from the American invasion, was a bird fancier; going home at the week-ends with his pockets bulging with bird seed, leaving his desk in his office littered with the neglected work of unknown British dramatists. Perhaps Reginald Simpson, disguised as a tramp, talked in Hyde Park on Sundays. You never knew. He looked like a reformer. Maybe Alan Parsons had a weakness for ballet dancing, practising in secret each morning as other men practised dumb-bell swinging. A dim picture of St. John Ervine wrestling with crossword puzzles took shape in her mind's eye, and she burst out laughing.

Temple, his uncovered hair ruffled by the wind, turned swiftly to her and away again.

"Speed makes you feel that way," he yelled. They

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

were doing sixty-five miles an hour at that moment. "I always want to laugh or sing."

"It wasn't the speed," she said, as near to his ear as she could get. "I'll tell you about it some other time. When you need cheering up."

"That won't be any time within the next three weeks. Better tell me now!"

She shook her head: "Where do we lunch?" she asked instead.

"Good heavens! You hungry already?"

"Not too! But I hadn't much breakfast, and this air is rather thrilling."

"There's a packet of chocolate in the pocket of the door on your side. Try it. It's good. We're lunching at Stamford, and I refuse to stop before that!"

"You're quite a thoughtful man, aren't you?" she said, tearing the crinkly paper from the chocolate.

"Oh, I'm wonderful! Didn't you know?"

"There are lots of things I don't know about you."

He went slower as he said: "Perhaps you'll find them out during the next three weeks."

"Perhaps, Dee. But I'm not on a story this trip!"

"Must you be on a story before you want to find out about some people?"

"No. About *some* people."

"Do I weep now?"

"Do you feel that way?"

"Well, not like weeping. Just sort of sniffing."

She offered him her handkerchief.

"Heartless woman," he hissed.

"Brute," she rejoined. "Have a piece of chocolate."

"Is it good for a broken heart?"

"It's jolly good for an empty tummy."

They munched happily together. He had pulled the speed down, and they cruised along at a steady, purring forty, the big car holding the road comfortably. He

drove well. She noticed his hands : clever capable hands, not gloved, making a minimum of motion or fuss, knowing what they wanted to do, and doing it skilfully. She noticed other pleasant features about him. She had rather taken him and his friendship without question. Remembering that they had seldom got very near each other, she was surprised at the change which in some mysterious way had suddenly coloured the footing of their friendship. Dewar Temple talking about broken hearts! It was more like young Hicks. He might indeed be a grown-up young Hicks!

What had brought about the change in his attitude? The sunny morning? The freedom of the holiday with its inevitable mental flights? Or the instinctive knowledge that she was different, that some barrier which had been between them was gone? His loose actor-like face was animated, full of expression; his grey eyes had a new life to them. Was he really the clever actor who had known his cue? She wondered, but did not care. She should worry!

"It's going to be great fun," she said. "Tell me about some of the people who are coming up at the end of the week. Only two of my friends are coming. Dicky Webster. You'll like him, Dee; rather the style of Hicks in the office; an awful sport. And Roger Blake. A good sort. Nothing specially marvellous about him. Just a good all-round everything."

"They both love you?"

"Of course!"

"They would!" He broke off to point to an old windmill against the skyline. "Looks good, doesn't it. Oh, my friends? Connie Delaney is coming. She's a nice kid; had a small part in *Red For Passion*. Did you see it?"

"Yes. Ghastly, wasn't it?"

"Fairly. And Lena Graham."

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"The film actress?"

"Good for you. She'll be delighted that you recognised the name. She's only played in one film, but has had her picture in every London newspaper."

"That's how I know her. I thought she was important."

"Oh, no. Merely good-looking. No London paper can withstand a good-looking woman. Especially one who has also good-looking legs. She never had to show her legs in the film, but she certainly does in every published picture. She enjoys the joke as much as anyone. A real good sort."

"That all?"

"Two more. A brother and sister—Betty and Tony Wainwright. They do nothing, at least nothing exciting. They've got a little money, and I'm their uncle. They adore everybody connected with the stage, so when they knew I was going to spend my holiday with the much-photographed Lena, they pleaded like the very dickens to be allowed to join the party. They're good fun, and rather lively."

"Good. I want to be with lively people. I wanted to bring Paddy, but she could not get away, or something."

She lapsed into silence. Paddy had rather surprised her by being unable to arrange her holiday satisfactorily for both. Paddy usually managed to do pretty much as she liked, and it had been a disappointment to Fay that she had to make her plans without her.

As Temple had promised, they were at Stamford in time for lunch. Fay stretched her long legs lazily, and, when they came to the coffee stage, said: "D'you know, Dee, I think I'll sleep in the car after lunch. It's nice and comfy, and I hadn't much sleep last night. Do you mind if I disturb you with my snores?"

Like an anxious boy he answered, "Not a bit, but I

WISDOM IN THE MORNING

say, you might put off the snooze until after Grantham. You can sleep as long as you like after that."

"Why Grantham?"

He explained. "Well, from here to Grantham is twenty-one miles, and it's a straight stretch with a decent chance for speeding. I'd like you to see me do the stretch in twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes! This is England!" She laughed at his keenness. "Not with me in the car. You'd better not try it!"

"Please, Fay."

"Oh, all right. Do what you like, little boy. By the way, where do we sleep to-night?"

It seemed to her that the grey in his eyes deepened for a second.

"Where would you like to put up?" he asked.

"I haven't the foggiest. Let's see the map."

He handed it to her, his eyes on her face. She scanned it quickly.

"What's our route? Grantham, Doncaster, Darlington, Newcastle?" She broke off. "We're not in a tearing hurry, are we?" and continued as he shook his head: "Well, let's go off the course a little and make for Harrogate. Like to?"

"Like anything—if you're going to be there."

"I hope you're not thinking of dropping me on the way? Not on that straight stretch you're so keen about, anyway!"

He was nearly five minutes out in his time on the twenty-mile stretch, and was miserable in consequence, but Fay consoled him by saying she could not have stood it if they had travelled faster; and certainly it seemed to her that they were flying as they roared over the ground, flashing past white dots of picnickers who stood up to cheer their madness and look longingly after them, hoping for a crash.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

When he had pulled the speed back to thirty-five, they seemed to be crawling.

"This is better for the nerves," Fay said, "and for my snooze. Good-night, Mr Temple. Wake me for tea, please."

He brought the car to a standstill. "Don't I get a good-night kiss?"

"Why not?" and raised her lips and closed her eyes, and thought suddenly, hurtlingly, of David as the man's mouth touched hers. Then she opened her eyes, and laughed, and settling herself in the seat, murmured: "But you mustn't make a habit of it."

She slept. The afternoon was gloriously warm. The car, slowed down to an indecently decent speed, rolled quietly through the green country. Now and again Temple turned toward her. Once, touching her with his left hand, he pulled down over her eyes an improvised handkerchief sunshade. She did not stir. She slept peacefully, dreamlessly, her red lips parted slightly in innocent invitation.

So the soft afternoon passed. The long white road stretching ahead was eaten up slowly, too slowly for Dewar Temple, but steadily. Through queer little villages—two or three houses clustered together for companionship in one street which was itself the main road—he took the car; waving to children playing on the worn doorsteps, or nodding pleasantly to old men warming themselves in the sun, or smiling to himself, lazily, dreamily, for no reason at all. Once or twice, coming upon some scape of the country scene that was particularly beautiful, or some rich meadow or some twist in the road that brought about a sudden sharp new picture, he was tempted to wake her to share the pleasure of it. But he drove on, knowing his Fay Sharon; forgetting that those people who are ordinarily most out of sympathy with country

WISDOM IN THE MORNING

life are its loudest lovers during a limited period of holiday.

Presently she woke, confused; commanded him not to look at her until he had taken her somewhere for tea so that she could dab at her face and make herself something like a woman again.

"I am most damnably sunburnt," she complained, and was rather pleased than otherwise when she peered into her mirror, "but most refreshed, and almost brutishly hungry."

"Hungry!" He was startled.

She looked down her nose at him. "Don't make such a fuss about it. I can pay for my own tea!"

"You independent woman!"

"And I think it will have to be a high tea, young man. I hope you don't mind frightfully, but motoring does make me hungry, and when I'm in the country I always revert to the customs of my ancestors. What about eggs and bacon?"

"Oh, for goodness sake, Fay! Where's your sense of beauty? Look at the beautiful countryside."

"Marvellous, isn't it? But it doesn't take away my appetite. I say, slow up! Here's a topping little place. It is eggs and bacon, isn't it?"

"Make mine a double portion, please!"

(ii)

In this light-hearted way they finished their first day's journey, coming to Harrogate in time for dinner—for which Fay expressed a keen desire—patting the car an affectionate good-night; going up to their rooms to change; pretending a wretched guilt when they discovered that Temple's room adjoined hers and had a communicating door; calling to each other as they

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

dressed. It was the kind of frivolous companionship which Fay needed. Its lightness crowded out the serious side she wanted to forget, and gave her no opportunity for introspection. Dewar Temple in his new mood was a discovery and a godsend. If he had been his usual serious self, things might have been totally different. She dreaded that he would be different later on; she wanted him to continue in this silly way. It was the right way to take a holiday. You had to be slightly mad to enjoy life, life was so mad itself if you weren't.

She need not have worried about Temple. He was only too eager to continue the banter. He tapped on her door before going down. She called to him to come in. He entered, but she did not look round, being busy at her mirror. Then his silence struck her, and she wheeled round.

He was standing with his back to her door, his arms outstretched dramatically across it, barring her way had she attempted to get out. In one hand he gripped the key.

"Ah, ha," he sneered. "I have news for you."

For a moment she was startled. Then she grasped his intent, stifled her laughter, and struck her burlesque rôle. It was like being back in the Club.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"The car is broken down."

"Not broken up?"

"No, down!"

She said bravely, "Then we must go home by train."

"The last train has gone."

She stared at him, like innocence suddenly affrighted.

"Gone?"

"Gone. Out to time. For once."

"What shall we do?"

He said slowly. "We shall have to stay here. At this hotel."

"No! No!"

"And this is the only room left in the hotel."

"What do you mean?"

"This—is—the—only—room—left—in—the—hotel."

"Oh, God, you cannot mean—" a stifled shriek—"My honour!"

"Ah, ha, Lady Kitty, you thought you could burke me! But I am not one to be burked—" He broke off:

"I say, we are a couple of clowns. Come and have a drink before dinner, Lady Kitty."

"Gladly, Sir Gerald."

She was gay, animated, her eyes flashing with life. Already her city weariness had dropped from her like an old garment; exhilarated with the day's run, she was a vivid, lovely thing as she sat down to dinner with him. He could not take his eyes from her face, and seeing him thus she was pleased and flattered, teasing him with her eyes, mocking him with her lips. She drank too much—she meant to—and talked rather loudly and laughed too joyously. Furtive admiring glances were cast in her direction from other parts of the room, and she saw them and mentioned them to Temple, who had already seen them.

She could read his thoughts easily as he sat looking into her face. There was hope in him. She could sense it in the air around them and feel it in his hand as he touched her once across the table. It was in the tremble of his finger as he plied her with more wine. And she laughed to see and feel it, and life beat quicker within her, and she felt gay and reckless and queerly, foolishly sad.

The sad part annoyed her. She tried to drown it. Temple did his best to help. She felt that she could be kind to this man who had come to her rescue. He had taken her away from the rotten business in town and had cheered her up with his presence, his humour, his understanding. She was tender toward him at dinner,

and wanted to be tenderer, but a steady glow of unwanted consciousness somewhere at the back of all her thoughts and actions kept her to limits and made her stronger than she desired.

But she was nice to him. He deserved that. They lingered over their coffee in the lounge, and even then he had not read his fate, so attractively baffling was she, so easy and yet so difficult, so willingly weak and yet so subconsciously strong.

Afterward, he said: "I am putting through a trunk call to the office just to see if there is anything doing. I always do; and I'm rather expecting a message there for me. Anything you want to say at the same time?"

He brought back reality with that, a chilling reality of offices and printing machines and stories and people she sought to forget.

"No," she said shortly. "I want to get away from it all."

She watched him go out to the office in the hall, and liked his easy, distinguished bearing. He was back in a minute murmuring: "They'll let me know when the call comes through," and he dropped into the chair beside her and sat chatting. He suggested that they should go for a stroll in the cool of the evening, but she was feeling drowsy and said she preferred bed. . . . "Especially as we've got a long run to-morrow." Then she felt she was being unkind, repented, and said quickly: "Of course I'd love to go for a walk with you before I turn in. It'll do me good anyway. Haven't had any exercise to-day at all."

When his telephone call came, and he had left her once more, she sat thinking. Reaction came rapidly. The day had been too good, too flippant. Their relations had been much too frivolous, too unsubstantial: like a meal of whipped cream. He had met her need of the moment, but the moment had passed, and now she required some-

thing more solid to grip on to. Something serious and sincere and lasting.

All the people she knew seemed to hide their real selves under this foolish persiflage, this gay pretence. You never got anywhere with them because it was the most effective barrier. They seldom revealed themselves, and you had the feeling that although you had known a person for years and years, you never really knew them at all. What they were underneath. What they thought—if they thought at all; what they wanted; what they believed in life. They *must* have other selves beneath all this nonsense. Just as she had. But they never allowed them to come out into the open. Neither did she. Perhaps people wondered at her, just as she was puzzled about them. The whole thing seemed to be a game of make belief, a gigantic hoax. It was so damned silly!

Dewar Temple now! What did she know of him? She had thought she knew all about him before, but that morning he had transformed himself into a new being, with ideas similar to the ideas of young Hicks and aspirations similar to those of—well, most men. It was almost comic—if it wasn't so tragic. It was his tragedy. He had no right to change like this, putting himself on the same footing as all the other men when she had been so sure he was miles away from it.

It would only lead to disappointment for him. She knew that, but as yet he didn't. That was because he did not really know her, because she disguised herself like all those other people she was criticising. Life always came back on you like that. You thought disparagingly of someone, and then discovered you had the same faults you criticised in them. Frightfully annoying.

He came back to her, smiling. They went out shortly afterwards; into a night just taking the harsh light out of day, softening the whole world with a velvet twilight

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

and a full, dead-white moon. The twilight deepened as they walked. The moon came up like a gleaming guardian, flooding them in its cold light, throwing long black shadows of trees across their path. They talked quietly, lapsing now and again into long silences.

She looked beautiful in the moonlight. The man, gazing at her, caught his breath. When she suggested returning to the hotel, he agreed quickly. She slipped her arm through his as they went back. The night had made them more serious and taken away their laughter and high spirits, and in his old returned mood she liked him better.

At the door of their hotel she said, "Are you sure I'm not taking you up too early? Wouldn't you like to have a last cigar alone?"

"No. I'm tired. I'd much rather go to bed now."

They went up in the lift in silence.

At her door she held out her hand.

"It's been absolutely topping, Dee. I have enjoyed every minute of to-day, and I'm looking forward to to-morrow. Good-night."

"Fay!" His hand closed on hers, a warm, trembling hand. She knew its message so well. She waited reluctantly.

"It's been wonderful," he went on quickly. "*You've* been wonderful. Don't let's end it like this."

She could have discomfited him by pretending not to know what he meant. Some women did. She had done it herself once with a man. And had been young enough and fool enough to enjoy it. But life had taught her a few things since that night. She was sorry for Dewar Temple.

She touched his hand with her free fingers.

"I'm sorry, Dee. It's got to be."

Like all men he protested: "But, why——?" and she knew he would go on, if she let him, and talk about their

WISDOM IN THE MORNING

having only once to live, and all the rest of the argument. So she laughed softly, and said :

"My dear man, I don't know *why*. Nobody does. It's just how they're made. You ought to know that"; and because it was so eminently sane a reply, he loosened his grip and fell back from her, puzzled a bit, but not uncomfortable.

"You're a darling, Fay," he said. "My luck's terrible!"

"Too bad, Dee. But life's full of others, you know."

He said, "Good-night. Forget it happened. It won't again, of course."

"I know it won't."

She stood framed in her doorway, making an alluring picture. He turned suddenly away; and then, as she was about to go into her room, he wheeled round, remembering, and said: "By the way, I'm very sorry, but I forgot to tell you that Mac had a message for you to-night when I telephoned him."

"Mac?" She stiffened with interest.

"Yes. He wanted me to tell you that he's got a good follow-up on your Princess Sadrine story. Apparently he's managed to have another interview with her, and she's clearing out of the silly business she was running. He's awfully bucked at the way you handled the thing."

"That all?"

"No. The chap in the story, Musgrave, called you up at the office to-day from Paris."

She said harshly, "Dee, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Clean forgot." His eyes met hers frankly. "He rang you up twice, as a matter of fact, and the office tried to get you at your flat but without luck, of course. And they couldn't get you anywhere else."

"Didn't he leave any message?"

"Only that he'd seen a version of the story in the

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Paris papers and had had a wire from your brother that you wrote the tale. He wanted to have a chat with you about it."

"I see." She glanced at the watch on her wrist. There may have been some connection between the action and her thoughts, but it was lost before she knew what it was.

"The second time he 'phoned, they tried to get him to say what it was he wanted, but he said it didn't matter."

It didn't matter. It didn't matter. Well, did it, after all? He'd only wanted to slate her. Naturally. Probably wanted, like Tom and everybody else, to say pointedly what he thought about her.

"But they gave him your address at North Berwick," Temple was saying, "and he took a note of it."

"How do you know that?"

"He asked them to repeat the name of the hotel. He may get you there, Fay."

She thought of David Musgrave's voice over the telephone. Unexpectedly gay. She wished she had heard it. What did it matter if he did want to slate her about the story? She could have talked with him, established that contact with him that had been missing for such a long time, told him even how wretched she was over the business and that she'd never forgive herself. If only she had been able to get in touch with him!

She said miserably, "Oh, Dee, I wish you had told me this earlier."

She closed the door of her room, shutting herself off from the world. Her thoughts fought with each other as she undressed and crept into bed. At three o'clock in the morning she was still awake and looking at the face of her watch.

"I'm glad I got some sleep this afternoon," she thought.

CHAPTER XIV

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

NORTH Berwick. Rugged rocks and high seas breaking over them. Testing golf courses. Beautiful gulls sweeping in from the Bass Rock. Fun in the bathing pool, and greater fun with their own bathing party along the stretch of golden sand on the West Bay. Foolish pierrots, not half so foolish as themselves. Cool, lazy nights with the breeze from the sea stinging sun-scorched faces. Long hours in the sunlight, chatting, flirting, reading. North Berwick—quaint, clean, unspoilt North Berwick.

Fay loved it. It was something new to her. In seaside places she was used to the promenade and all the well-ordered arrangements of the promenade. There was a feeling about the usual place that it was there especially for visitors. North Berwick was different. It did little for the visitors; almost ignored them; went its blissful way without thought of promenade, bands or the hundred other things that visitors usually got at other seaside resorts. It had marvellous stretches of sand, and thought it could limit its bathing facilities to a pool sheltered among the rocks.

But it had health, an overwhelmingly strong blend of health which knocked Fay off to sleep for the first two days, and made her fit to join in her party's vigorous pleasures for the rest of the holiday. During these first two days she expected at any moment to be called on the telephone, but they passed without David Musgrave troubling to follow up the information given him by her office, and thereafter she proceeded to forget him.

The party gave her every help. It was the kind of

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

devil-may-care party she liked. It earned for London people generally the adverse opinion of good Scots people holidaying at North Berwick, and gave the local police force an anxious moment or two deciding just exactly where the line should be drawn between boisterous fun and downright disorder. Not that they were disorderly. They were merely high spirited. The unfortunate thing is that high spirits seem flagrant riotousness to people not enjoying them.

Dicky Webster had also motored up, bringing Roger Blake with him in his violently-coloured sports model. The pair had done the journey from town in a straight run of eleven hours, and throughout the holiday they made various cutting and humorous references to Dewar Temple's meteoric performance of two days running. They were secretly jealous of his escort of Fay, and got their own back by disparaging the speed of his car.

The others had come by train, Lena Graham actually contriving to get her photograph taken by a Press camera-man at King's Cross as she left.

"Gee, I don't know how it is," she explained (she always talked with an American accent, although she had never been out of England; it got her more attention from English producers and newspapers); "but they certainly seem to like my picture. Gee, I didn't expect to see that man at the station with his camera. When he came over and said 'I'd like to take your photograph, Miss Graham,' I just said, 'Please, my nerves!' but he took it just the same. You've certainly got to hand it to these newspaper people for perseverance. What! *You're* one, too"—to Fay—"well, say, listen. . . ."

They became fast friends. Lena saw to that. But in spite of her love for newspapers and newspaper people, she was a delightful, kind-hearted little thing with fair curly hair, and marvellous legs. They quite came up to what the photographs had led one to expect. She showed

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

them off proudly as she posed in front of them in her slight bathing dress, and the men gazed in wonder. Webster and Roger Blake pretended to be overcome, and lay on the sand calling for help; but she was off in a red flash to the water, and Temple and Tony Wainwright were after her in pursuit.

Connie Delaney was different. She took her work seriously, too seriously, and in other company might have been a wet blanket. But the party killed her desire to discuss Ibsen and Strindberg at all odd moments of the day, although it listened decently and answered back intelligently at the right time, and she came into line and contributed her bit to the fun. She was an excellent mimic, giving humorously effective imitations of the off-stage idiosyncrasies of some of the better known actors and actresses. She was not beautiful, but there was character in her thin face, and Tony Wainwright fell an early victim to her charm.

Tony was a strange young man. At twenty he had been studying for the law. At twenty-one someone left him and his sister money. At twenty-two he had gone in for farming. In appearance he ought to have been an artist. He had long black hair, a pale, ascetic face, burning black eyes and the wiry body of an athlete. In addition he had quite an aesthetic passion for beer, to which taste he tried to convert the whole party. Fay did not know what to make of him, but thought that Connie Delaney would probably make of him a jolly good husband, and pretend to the rest of her days that she regretted giving up her profession to be his wife. They were such an oddly-matched pair that, if the thing did come off, it was bound to be a hopeless success.

His sister, Betty, was the quietest member of the bunch. She said nothing for the first day, took a violent fancy to Fay the next—when Fay was too sleepily to reciprocate—and became increasingly interested in Dicky

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

Webster as the holiday progressed. She was good at all games, swimming well, playing a decent round at golf, and possessing a tennis service that had the men guessing for some time. In her bathing suit she had a figure almost as good as Fay's, and legs almost as good as Lena Graham's. Yet she was not anything definite herself. A quiet, shy girl, who looked at Lena and Connie through her blue eyes in a way that made them in turn feel shy of her adoration. Stage-struck, obviously; lacking the nerve or the ability to make an effort to do something for herself in the profession.

Such was the party that North Berwick had to contend with. It made a brave show, but went down—smiling.

They had no plan for their holiday. They let each day decide that day's arrangements, but generally they golfed in the mornings, starting out from the first tee about nine o'clock so that they would complete their round in time for a swim before lunch. Afterward they rested, usually on the beach, or went for a run in the cars, and between tea and dinner they played a hard set at tennis.

But sometimes the programme was varied, the morning being spent lazily on the sands, with the usual dip before lunch, and golf in the afternoon. And sometimes, when it was too hot, or they were too lazy to do anything, they stretched themselves on the beach and idled gloriously all day, slipping into the water once before lunch and twice in the afternoon. Those were the days Fay Sharon enjoyed most. It was lovely to come out of the water, and towel vigorously, and lie warming in the sun, talking to nice people whom she got to like more and more. There was a pleasant comradeship among the party. They were all young, with the exception of Temple, but he was so youthful in spirit and sympathy that his forty odd years were never noticed, and at golf and tennis he gave as good as he got.

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

They ragged a lot on the beach, and in the water. They dived off each other's shoulders, the girls climbing up the wet slippery bodies of the men, gasping with laughter. And just as they got into their precarious position, and raised their arms shakily, their toes on the man's shoulders would be tickled, and they went splashing and screaming into the sea. At times they took huge rubber animals in with them and tried desperately to ride them on the waves, holding the North Berwick Selling Plate race one memorable afternoon amid great excitement.

But there would be the quiet lazy periods of resting, when, in reaction, they were soberly reflective, talking about anything that happened to come to mind, not too seriously, but not banteringly, in low, confidential tones. Fay liked that best because she got the feeling that they were a family; that these people had an intimate interest in her own life; that they were concerned about her and her welfare. They all seemed to belong to one group; it was too awful for contemplation that one day the end of the holiday would arrive, and they would disperse, and the happy atmosphere be destroyed for ever. In her need of protection, the herd instinct came uppermost. She wanted company, crowds. This party was the best thing that could have happened to her. She felt safe in it. The world was a far-off nightmare that might batter an individual but could not destroy a family.

They were like a wall around her as they lay grouped on the sand; fluffy Lena showing her legs unashamedly; the Wainright girl, empty-headed but affectionate; Connie, with her thin face revealing expression and character whenever she spoke, her eyes often wandering across to Tony; the men—cheery, comforting, strong-looking devils. God, she was glad she was with them!

On the golf course it was different. They did not

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

often play a foursome game; so mostly she trekked round the course with only one of the others, often being alone for many minutes on her way to the green, coming up to two of the others if there was a hold-up at the next tee, and watching them drive off in a minute or two and leave her again. So, always when it was put to the crowd for a decision, Fay Sharon voted for the sand and the sea, and the lazy chatter that she knew would go with them.

She loved their company at meals. Lunch was a more hurried affair, but dinner was a happy event in the day's programme, a protracted meal at their table, with the healthy day behind them and the cool evening ahead for dancing and walking and soothing sleep. The feeling that they were a family grew stronger. The habits of their day sharpened the impression. They all went in together to prepare for dinner, dusty, tired, usually in flannels. And after they had bathed and changed they moved in and out of each other's bedrooms, urging speed so that they could all chatter over cocktails before going to their table.

Cocktail time became a function. They formed themselves into a cocktail club, elected Temple as president, drew up a list of rules, and decided that the cocktail of the day should be chosen by members in rotation. The men knew they took a risk with such a decision, but they were brave fellows and the sea air had made them reckless. And, knowing the women members pretty well, they felt comparatively safe. Fay was tempted to make her choice a Barney Google, but she changed her mind and plumped instead for an innocuous mixture which earned for her a reputation of not being half so wicked as she looked.

Often they danced after dinner. Once they went to the local cinema and were nearly turned out for creating an uproar. Occasionally they all went into one of their

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

bedrooms—it was usually Fay's because she had got the largest—and gambled modestly on a racing game Roger Blake had brought with him. Eight toy horses with coloured jockeys were moved automatically along a board by the release of a wound-up cord, their rate of progress being determined by little steel balls which pushed them forward, slowly or quickly according to the skill of the winder of the cord.

There was plenty of excitement attached to the game, each race taking about thirty seconds to decide, and the winners being varied enough to supply the betting with the element of doubt that made for a thrill when the horses were released. The game was placed on Fay's bed, and they clustered round it, noisy with their entreaties to "Come on, blue!", "Wake up, red!", "Do it, green; do it, darling!". They did not play the game too late to disturb other people who wanted to sleep; they were always ready to sleep themselves, usually retiring at an hour which allowed them a decent rest before an early rising the following morning.

Fay's bedroom became something of a private club-room. They frequently had a last five-minute chat all together in her room before going to bed. Once—the only time they were not abed before midnight—the chat developed into a full-dress discussion on love, and went on until two o'clock in the morning. It was a futile business, because—like most discussions—it got them nowhere, but they were all intensely interested in it at the time. Which might have meant anything—from a slur on their intelligence to a tribute to that night's cocktail chooser.

Fay could not remember how it began, but they started to get interested when Dewar Temple proceeded on challenge to explain why he thought love was almost bound to go out of fashion. It was a most elaborate theory. All kinds of things were responsible: dancing;

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

dress; "surplus women"—yells of protest from the four present; a growing intelligence among men; American films. They heartily agreed that if anything could kill love the last-named certainly would, but they were not so sure about the others.

Temple elaborated. His theory applied only to Britain, he said, looking round and wishing Fay would offer them all those ripping lemon squashes she sometimes got that waiter pal of hers to mix for them. And it was based first of all on Nature's mistake in making so many more women than men. (That definitely put the drink "off," he saw, for Fay had grown interested. Most remiss of her.)

All these women were playing ducks and drakes with life. They didn't know what to do about it, really, so they pretended there was nothing to worry about. A little thing like that! They laughed at any man who mentioned their "problem" and proceeded to get on with the job. But this is how they were getting on with it: they individually refused to consider that *they* were a surplus woman, and with more necessity than ever before, they invented clothes specially designed to show off their good points and attract men to them. Coincidentally with this (a lurking fear creeping into each of them that, after all, they *might* be a surplus woman), they hardened themselves against a disappointment, became sexless creatures, engaged in work hitherto done by men, and, flaunting a pseudo independence, nullified the attractiveness of their Eve-like frocks.

Not only that, but the frocks alone defeated their object. Temple warmed to his subject. Which woman allured most, he asked; the woman who was no longer a mystery or the woman who was? He asked them, as men who knew, was there anything wonderful about a naked woman? Did artists fall in love with the model whose physical points they knew from A to Z, or with

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

the clothed, peroxidized wench who served them their beer at the corner pub?

The more woman showed, the less mysterious (and therefore the less attractive) she became to men. Men were no longer thrilled with women's legs. They were bored by them. They had legs flaunted before their eyes in streets, in tubes, in offices. They had them in the theatre, dozens of them in a line from one end of the stage to the other; boringly nude. They had them pushed on to their supper tables by cabaret girls who had the audacity to think they would be interested in them. The naked woman—and that's what woman was trying to be—couldn't draw a man away from his mother!

Hadn't they read Anatole France's *Penguin Island*? Hadn't they heard the story of the man who, being told of the play in which a naked woman—an absolutely naked woman—came on to the stage on a horse, exclaimed: "Oh, I must see that. I haven't seen a horse for such a long time"? Well, that was *everyman*! Men weren't to be drawn that way, and women hadn't the sense to see it; they were so busy pretending to be hard, independent things one minute, and soft, seductive Eves the next.

Fay rang for the waiter to order the lemon squashes. Temple, inspired, went on with it. Woman, in confusing herself, had bewildered and antagonised man. If she were such a marvellously efficient thing, man felt, and able to look after herself in this new way, let her get on with it. *He* wasn't going to chase her. He didn't need to, thank God. There were just enough sensibly soft things left over to make up for the loss of the hard kind. They weren't the women he was going to marry, of course, but then they were willing. So why worry? And why marry, anyway? Marry something that kept on reminding you all the time that woman was as good

as man, and got the law to prove, as a matter of fact, that she was a jolly sight better?

The law also was killing love. Once upon a time it had undoubtedly favoured man, and lots of women were old-fashioned enough, and happy enough, to be glad that it did. But to-day, with woman so assertive, the law had switched round to her side and dealt a few nasty ones at old Adam. A married man had precious few rights; women, through the law, had seen to that. Well, man was remedying that sort of thing by keeping out of marriage. And quite right, too. You couldn't blame him. Not when he had to pay her income tax on a salary she earned probably through neglecting her home. Not when he had so little legal say in the matter of the children. Not when . . . and so on.

There was no use blinking facts. Man wasn't naturally antagonistic to woman. It was woman who had made him so—out of Fear. Love was dying because of the hardness that had crept into life, especially in the relations between the two sexes. Man wasn't falling in love and marrying something that was ready to regard itself as his enemy. Love didn't come that way. Surely.

People talked of taxing bachelors. Force the devils into loving if they couldn't love naturally! That was the new philosophy. Force them to take one of these women who could not win a bachelor for herself. And tax him, too, if he tried to get a divorce. That would come next! They'd see! Bands of women would demand that husbands who desired divorces be punished. But wives who desired them might have them—with the law's blessing. Why, even to-day in Great Britain, after two thousand years of Christianity and sixty years of free education, some wives had to be criticised by divorce judges because they wanted judicial separations, not divorces, from husbands who were already living with someone else, and who would not under any circum-

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

stances return to their wives. Many people made unhappy so long as one woman got revenge!

That was the new order of things. Woman *wanted*. She was so afraid she would get nothing, that she went out deliberately to get everything. That's where the hard look of hers came from. Walk down any street and watch the expressions of the people in it. Watch the hardness of the women's eyes and mouths—the "By God I'll get it" expression! No wonder love would go out of fashion. Men were seeing through the whole silly business. When women became women again they might change their minds about it, but at present they were doing a lot of thinking. And holding back.

"And what have the films to do with it?" Lena Graham asked.

Temple sipped his drink. "A lot. Twenty years ago a man never knew he looked such a silly ass when he hugged and kissed a girl. Now he's shown every time he goes to a cinema. You don't think any intelligent man, watching the exhibition on a screen, wants to turn himself into a moaning jackass. The same with musical comedies on the stage. Watch the expressions on the faces of the audience when the hero is singing the usual fatuous love song and leering into the girl's face. The women are all strained and intent. The men are snickering on one side of their faces and wishing they were in the bar."

"But I say," Dicky Webster protested. "You don't mean a kiss is a silly thing."

"Of course it is."

Fay said: "Is that what you thought when you kissed me in your car, Dee?"

They exploded with laughter.

Temple, momentarily discomfited, said, "Fay, you're no lady! Spoiling my speil like that! What do you mean by it?"

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

She pretended to be annoyed: "I like that! My kisses are silly things are they?"

But Temple had started something. The argument went on. Into the night they talked of the thing nearest always to young people. They had flirted on the beach, and whispered to each other in the ballroom, and pretended across the table at meals, but they had never before discussed love at this length. And they made the most of the opening.

Fay sat on top of her bed with Dicky Webster. Lena had the comfortable armchair, Betty the other. Tony Wainwright and Connie were close together on a cushion on the floor. Roger Blake sat on the room's one chair, and Temple stood mostly but at times sat uncomfortably against her dressing-table. He talked too much to notice his discomfort, however, and the others talked too much to notice theirs.

But Fay noticed them. Their picture bit deep into her mind. They were her family for the time being, her protection. She was glad they lingered in her room and talked. She wished that they might never go, or that other nights would be as this, other nights with them all together; other nights—many, many other nights in the future. It was a precious night because it was the only one. It reminded her of school. They were like eager youngsters with their talk and their far-fetched argument and their fantastic ideas. But they were terribly, wonderfully, friendly.

Life threw little families together in this way. In hotels; in ships; in other similar places. For a week or a month people from all parts of the world were drawn together, pooling their experiences, their friendliness, their sympathies. Like was attracted to like; a happy communal life was started, thrived, flourished. In no time, it seemed, this family had been for ever before, for as far back as one could remember. And then it was

LONDON LOOKS GOOD—FROM A DISTANCE

finished. A ship docked, or a hotel holiday came to an end, and all that had been had never been. The family dispersed, the members went their separate ways, life went on. The units of the family lived. But what had become of the family as a whole? Had everything that it had once been meant nothing at all? Did precious things die thus, with the running-up of a ship's gangway or the saluted farewell of a hotel commissionaire?

She did not hear everything they said that night. But she was conscious always of their nearness and of what they meant to her. She had the strange feeling that she was pausing to take note of something that the others would look back upon and wish they could recover. Most experiences were like that. You lived them either in anticipation or in retrospect. One seldom stopped in the middle of something thrilling and said: "This is good, and I am conscious that it is good even as I am living it. I shall look back on this and be glad to remember that I knew it was good while I was living it. This is grasping the present."

And she was doing it. But mostly you could not do this. The present carried you so quickly away into the future. And soon the present became a past, not easily to be recovered, and the other people who had formed that past did not always remember it as you remembered it. You met them months afterwards, years afterwards, and with your eyes all hazy with gladness you looked at them and said: "... do you remember the night when we all did such and such a thing?" And they looked back at you in a puzzled way and you saddened to see they had forgotten while they pretended to remember.

Fay did not hear all their foolish talk, but she knew who talked, and she saw their gestures, the flash of their eyes, the blue wisps of smoke curling up from neglected cigarettes. And the thought struck her that she was growing old to note these things, or changing, or be-

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

coming too introspective. But she noticed this family because she was grateful to it. She would never forget it.

She said little. She had nothing to say about love or marriage. She had her thoughts about them, but they were for herself now. And if they wondered at her silence they did not question. Like a wise family, it seemed almost that they understood.

And when they had gone from her room, yawning, tired, lazily affectionate toward her, she stood for a while in the smoke haze left behind them, and thought again of how they had all looked as they talked. And she knew that she had captured the most precious thing of the holiday.

North Berwick. The long lazy days. The sunshine. The dear comradeship of this protecting party. The bathing on the golden sands. The merry meals and the starry nights and the cool wind from the sea. The deep voices of the men, appreciated here, now, in the present. All that this party stood for! All that it hid her from, giving her strength to go back to it.

The intense happiness of it all.

And underneath—the ache.

CHAPTER XV

PADDY MAKES A DECISION. SO DOES FAY

(i)

THEIR journey back to London was a silent and gloomy business. Dewar Temple talked little, being preoccupied with the driving in his efforts to cover the distance in twelve hours, including stops for food. They left North Berwick at nine o'clock in the morning, and they were both anxious to get home before ten at night. At the beginning of their holiday they had intended the return journey to be a two-day one on the lines of their outward trip, but they had hung on to North Berwick till the last possible moment, and a one-day journey home was absolutely imperative.

Fay was glad he was quiet. She was content to sit silent herself, making commonplace remarks from time to time, as he did. It was an understanding silence. Each knew how the other was feeling. If either of them contrasted it with the happy run up to North Berwick, they did not mention it.

Fay resolutely put the holiday out of her mind and busied herself with plans for the future. North Berwick was over—Forget it! But other things were just beginning—Get ready for them. Until then she had forgotten the future in the absorbing joy of the present. Now she remembered that Paddy and she would be clearing out of David's flat. She had landed Paddy for this: it was up to her to make some arrangement for both of them.

They were not going back to the Club, anyway. Thank

heaven there was no need for that. She was earning sufficient salary now to fend for herself comfortably, and if Paddy liked to contribute her share, there was no reason why they should not have a flat of their own. But it would be a more modest flat than David's, if not smaller, and certainly it would not be in Jermyn Street.

It would be fun to have their own place, and to furnish it just as they wanted. They could make it very comfortable, and could have gay times with friends, or long quiet periods to themselves, with Tom coming along sometimes. She had forgotten Tom. She would have to make things right with him before they could resume their old intimate comradeship. She had fallen heavily in his estimation and she would have to win him back to her side.

Perhaps he had altered his view of her conduct during her absence. Perhaps the three weeks had softened him. But she knew he could be stubborn, and she was prepared for a struggle in this direction. But the thought of a struggle now did not daunt her as it would have three weeks earlier. She was stronger, able to stand up to the world again.

She felt like that as they crossed Piccadilly. Temple had made good time, and they were in the Circus at half-past nine. A few minutes later he pulled up at the flat and came round to her side of the car, stiff and tired, to help her out.

She was stiff herself with the unusual inaction after days of active exercise.

"Come in for a drink," she invited, but he refused and she was glad. She wanted to swoop in on Paddy and surprise her. She had not told her when she would return, and it would be fun to run in, throw her arms round her neck, and feel Paddy's glad kisses of welcome.

Softly she slipped her key into the lock, opened the door, and crashed in.

PADDY MAKES A DECISION. SO DOES FAY

"Hello, Paddy!" she called out. "Your mother's home!"

And then she drew back in disappointment. The flat was empty, gloomy in the gathering dusk, coldly lonely and inhospitable.

Temple followed her in with her bags. She sighed and switched on the light, tossing her hat despondently on the divan. She was ready to be dispirited. Paddy in the flat would have made all the difference.

"Thanks awfully, Dee. Sure you won't have a drink?"

He again refused. "I'm going right off to have a bath and turn in to bed. I'm dog tired, Fay."

"Poor old man," she sympathised. "But you've had all the strain of driving. You brought the car along beautifully."

That pleased him, and he freshened up gratefully. She thought for a dreadful moment that he might, after all, stay for the proffered drink, but he was off a minute later, and she was left alone in the flat.

She decided that it had been foolish of her to expect Paddy to be at home. Paddy had had three lonely weeks in the place, sleeping alone every night. She was probably glad to be out as much as she could in the evening. She'd arrive presently, and they'd have a real old-time chat together, making up for lost time.

As she went into the bathroom to turn on the taps, she remembered how she had stood alone so much in her Club days, keeping apart from girls—even Paddy—and she laughed to think that now she looked forward so keenly to the arrival of the other girl. Why did she feel this need of companionship? Even now, merely because Paddy had not yet come home, she felt that the flat was dreadfully lonely. And quiet. Almost sinister, she could have convinced herself, if she had given way to fear. But she reasoned that the explanation lay, not

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

in the empty flat, but in the crowded days that had immediately preceded this one. The flat was the anticlimax to the holiday. That was all.

Then, as she put her tooth-brush into the tumbler which usually held both, she noticed that Paddy's tooth-brush was missing. She looked round the bathroom. The usual tablet of pale green soap which Paddy used was gone. Paddy's sponge and nail-brush were gone. There was no sign of Paddy's toothpaste.

Puzzled, she went into their bedroom. It seemed emptier. It was emptier. Paddy's things had disappeared—the kimono from the peg on the back of the door; her brushes from the dressing-table; her clothes and hats from the wardrobe; her trunk from its usual position at the foot of the bed. Everything.

She stood stock still for a moment; then, with fear fluttering her heart, she ran quickly into the larger room, seeking a clue to the mystery, steeling herself for further discoveries.

Nothing that was Paddy's remained in the room. A hurried glance at the books revealed that Paddy's particular novels had been taken away. Her writing-pad had gone from its drawer; even her favourite pen.

The flat was unnaturally quiet, the trickling taps in the bathroom seeming to break into and accentuate the stillness. Distracted, she turned toward the cold fireplace. On the mantelpiece a square white envelope addressed to her in Paddy's hand caught her eye, and she snatched it and tore it open, unfolded the two pages of close writing and read quickly:—

“DARLING FAY,

“I wanted to tell you sooner, but Tom would not let me. He is still awfully angry, and does not know I am writing this. But I must tell you, and I do want you to be there.

"I don't know exactly when you will get back to the flat, but I hope it is in time to be at Chelsea Registry Office on Thursday morning. Tom and I are being married there at noon.

"Oh, I'm so marvellously happy, darling. And I want you to be at the jolly old ceremony. I'm writing this at the flat before I leave for good, to go home to my people in the country for the last day or two to get ready for the great event. I'm coming up to town just before noon on Thursday and going straight to Chelsea to meet Tom there.

"By the way, don't say anything yet to your people about it. We're going down to blow in on them immediately after the big knot is tied. You know Tom begins his holidays then. And then we're going off to Dinard. Think of it! Dinard! Ye gods!

"Be there if you can, Fay. I want to see you *most particularly*. It's wonderful to think we're going to be sisters. Darling, I'm so happy, I want you to be happy too. *Are you?*

"PADDY."

She read the letter a second time, and sat down in the armchair, the pages still in her hand, her eyes gazing fixedly at the empty fireplace.

The water trickled in the bathroom, and she rose abruptly. Whistling softly to herself, she unlocked one of her cases and drew out her sponge-bag. Then she went into the bedroom—*her* bedroom now for one night more, probably—and let her clothes fall about her on the floor. She felt too tired to bend and pick them up, and she raised her foot and swept them out of her way toward the chair. Slowly she walked to the bathroom, still whistling.

She had visualised this bath during the day, especially on the last fifty miles of the motor journey when she

became weary of the trip. But she had not visualised it like this. She had meant it to be something different from this—a gay thing with Paddy somewhere within hailing distance all the time; a long, lazy bath interrupted every few minutes while she regaled her with details of the wonderful holiday. She was to have called Paddy into the room to show her how sunburnt she was—"all over"—and to laugh with pleasure when she heard the other's pretended derision.

Having towelled half-heartedly she went back, naked, into the bedroom, slipped on a silk nightdress and pulled her dressing-gown about her. She hummed a gay tune as she went into the larger room again, lifted her bags, and took out the things she wanted. The business of unpacking was hateful, but it kept her mind occupied.

She had brought from North Berwick one or two little presents for Paddy, and these she left at the bottom of her case. But she changed her mind, and took them out and placed them on the mantelpiece. She would give them to Paddy to-morrow.

To-morrow!

Her thoughts refused to be crushed out any longer by mechanical action and foolish whistling and humming. She sat down again in the armchair, and the silence of the place crept up and shrouded her. Loneliness crowded in upon her and touched her soul.

To-morrow at noon Paddy would be married to Tom. She had gone from the flat for ever, and she had gone out of Fay Sharon's life. It meant nothing that they would be sisters. Nothing at all. They would never be as near to each other as they had been in this little flat. It was all over. Another thing that had meant something in Fay's life had finished. It might never have been, now that it was ended.

Married. At twenty-one. Soon she would have a house of her own, and in a year she would be bending

over a baby, her eyes full of a possessive pride, her whole being radiant that she had been intimately concerned in such a marvellous achievement. Life would go on for her, smoothly, happily, contentedly. Paddy, the young matron! Paddy! The brooding little thing who had worshipped Fay in the Georgian Club, and who had shared the flat, always silently acknowledging that Fay was The Thing That Counted. Paddy who had sought Fay's guidance about love; who had questioned her about "repressions" and all the other nonsense talked at the Club; who had seemed so young because she was so young.

And it had come to her so easily. Almost without asking. She hadn't gone out of her way to get this. It had simply come to her. She had met Tom that night in the Gold Bug for the first time in her life. And tomorrow they were to be married, and all the rest of their life—God willing!—would be spent together.

How did it happen? *She*, who wanted that sort of thing, and who met a man under similar circumstances, went through hell, and didn't get him. Was as far off as ever from what she wanted.

It was a strange business! Paddy, who had now joined that band of virtuous wives who were out to keep marriage sacred, and men to themselves, had really joined forces against her! She was one with the frightened horde of women who sneered at Fay, or who were hypocritically sympathetic, because she had been shut out from what they enjoyed. One with the millions of scared wives who preached morality, and hated with a searing hate the woman who endangered their security by trading in love, or giving gladly in love, outside the holy bonds of matrimony.

Fay did not blame them. She understood them. It had been her desire, her instinct, to be one of them. As jealously as they she would have guarded her home

and fought for her possessions against the onslaughts of the vampire women, in whose ranks she must at present be numbered.

But she was not vampire at heart; she only desired similar things to those they had achieved. Circumstances were making evil out of innocence. It came to her that she, and the others like her who wanted what she wanted, did not deserve the suspicion of her married sisters. She saw herself as the supremely moral woman, since all her subterfuges and deceits had been to win—and thus support—the conventional moral marriage imposed by a society that took no note in these days of the difficulty of its accomplishment.

She laughed at the thought—and yet, it was a true one. Her attempts successful, would have been another prop supporting marriage; failing, they made her a menace to all wives.

There would be no sharing of a flat with Paddy now. Once more she was thrown back on herself and would have to fend for herself. It would be lonely.

For a time she played with the idea of returning to the Club, trying to convince herself that she could do it and tolerate it. It wasn't such a bad place after all. Fairly comfy, with few restrictions, and lots of company. Company. She thought of the lounge and the girls round the fire in the winter evenings and the foolish showing-off and the hidden envy. And the talk. Birth control; repression; free love; independence; men, men, men. Could she really stand up to that again after the freedom and homeliness of this flat with Paddy?

She knew she could not. To-morrow, after she had seen Tom and Paddy married, she would ask an agent to look out for a cheap flat for her. It wouldn't be like this. It would probably be farther away from the West End, and would not have half the conveniences of David's place. (David had really been a dear to sur-

render it to them in such a decent way.) She'd have to travel in crowded tubes and 'buses again. Pretty awful in the hot weather, but she'd soon get used to it. And she couldn't afford to go too far away from the West End, or get too modest a place. The nature of her work and the people with whom she had to keep in touch demanded that she should have a good address.

Her work? She thought of to-morrow, shivered and pulled her dressing-gown closer around her. The night was growing cool. She lighted a cigarette and puffed quickly, her eyes thoughtful.

(ii)

The sound of a key scratching in the lock of the outer door startled her. She stiffened in her chair, her head turned toward the sound. The outer door was opened. Someone stepped into the passage.

She leapt to her feet, calling out: "Who's there?" and at the same moment the inner door opened, and David Musgrave faced her.

He seemed surprised, and a little embarrassed, to see her. His tanned face had tired lines about the mouth and eyes, and he did not smile as he stood there, but slowly took off his hat, reached for the suitcase that rested against his leg, and pulled it into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Awfully sorry," he said, still standing. "Hadn't the foggiest idea you were here. Thought you were still in Scotland."

"I'm just back. An hour ago." Her throat felt queerly dry.

"I see."

She sat down, saying. "Do sit down, David. You look quite uncomfortable."

"I am, rather." His eyes looked at her as they had looked at her in that room before, seeing and yet un-seeing. "I hadn't the least idea I was barging in on you like this. I suppose you know about Tom and Paddy?"

She nodded, looking at him intently.

"Well, I'm just over for the event. Got a wire from Tom about the business, and he said you weren't here. I sort of gathered——" he paused.

"That I had gone for good?"

"Something like that," he said frankly. "So I naturally toddled along when I arrived, and here I am. I'm awfully sorry."

She smiled, "And awfully tired?"

"A little only."

"And thirsty?"

"Well——"

"Have a drink," she said, rising. "I'll get you something. What would you like?"

"That's nice of you." His eyes followed her as she crossed the room lightly. "But I don't want to trouble you. I'll breeze off to my club and put up there, I think."

"But surely you'll have a drink with me first?"

He said lamely: "I thought of having a meal of some sort."

She looked at him, and he met her gaze, but their look meant nothing. It was a polite veil, hiding the things they were thinking. She felt that he did not want to drink with her; he did not want to have anything to do with her.

On the impulse she said: "I'll cook you something, David."

"You!" He showed his surprise.

"Oh, I know I'm not much good at cooking, and I don't know if there's any food left in the pantry, but

if we have any eggs I could give you some eggs and bacon——”

“—if we’ve any bacon,” he finished, remembering an old army joke, and laughed shortly.

She seized the opening to smile back, and the coldness between them became less marked.

“Let me!” she urged, almost gaily. “I’d love to.”

He protested, “It’s a frightful fag for you,” and finished weakly: “but I’d like it a lot. I’m really hungry. I missed dinner to-night like an ass. Will you have some with me?”

“Wait till I see what we’ve got first, before we get too optimistic.” She moved toward the kitchen, and was back in a minute. “You’re in luck. Paddy’s left enough for us to have something like a real supper. What d’you say to eggs and bacon, toast and coffee?”

“Rather. You’re sure it’s not putting too much on to you?”

“Don’t be silly, David.”

Their eyes met again. She wished he would smile the funny baffling smile of his that she loved. His first had been an ordinary friendly smile that he might have given to anyone. She wanted the other. But it still eluded her. She had broken down the first coldness. There was something deeper that mere pleasant chatter could not dissipate.

He seemed much older, but he was tired with traveling, and hungry, and that perhaps was responsible for the strained expression in his face.

She said, “Would you like to wash while I am cooking the supper?”

And suddenly she saw that his eyes were searching hers, wanting her to speak other things than this silly nonsense about supper and eggs and bacon and washing. He took a step toward her.

She said quickly, the words torn from her: “David,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

I'm sorry about it all. I don't know why I did it. But I hated myself for it. I know it was too awful for words, and I know you won't ever forgive me for it, but I do want you to know that you couldn't despise me more than I do myself."

And because she had said it, he wanted to save her the embarrassment of it, and said: "Oh, Lord, Fay, it didn't matter at all."

"David, it was damnable."

"You did it very tactfully," he praised, and hurt her. "The story had to be told. I saw that——"

"It hadn't, David."

"—but it couldn't have been done with greater delicacy."

The sub-editor who had handled the story in the office had done that! With every word, Musgrave was making it worse for her.

"Of course, I was surprised myself," he went on. "I didn't know she was doing anything like that. Your paper was quite right to expose the business."

"It was my fault."

"Your job, you mean. I know what the newspaper game is. You've got to do things you hate doing."

This was the moment to start everything afresh, to sweep away false foundations. And because she was tired of her own humbug, she saw and seized it. Very deliberately, she said: "David, I enjoyed doing it."

He gazed at her, not understanding.

"I needn't have done it," she continued, not looking at him, but wondering, foolishly, how his brown shoes came to be so dusty on a journey from Paris. "My paper did not know the woman was your wife. I did. And I wrote my story—of my own free will. I wasn't forced to do it, David. I just did it."

He asked dully, "Why?"

"I think it was mostly because I loved you!"

For the first time a faint flicker of the smile came to life.

"And you wanted to hurt me?"

"Doesn't love do that sometimes?"

"Always," he said bitterly, harshly. He turned away from her and went toward the bathroom. "I'd like to wash before supper, please." He swung round again: "That is, if supper is still on. Is it?"

"Why not?"

"Thanks. And then I'll clear out. I'll go now, if you'd rather I did."

"I thought we had arranged to have supper together. My cooking isn't so deadly that you need be afraid of it, David."

He did not relent. His enmity stabbed her. It did not make it easier for her to say what she wanted to say.

"I'm sorry I was here to-night, too," she continued quietly. "Naturally, I wouldn't have been if I'd known you were coming. You see, I didn't know Paddy had gone. This was the first message I had about her—when I arrived back from Scotland an hour ago." She indicated Paddy's letter. "But I'll clear out to-morrow, David."

She hated the grim set of his face. It was useless trying to soften him. She said, abruptly: "I'll clear out to-night if you like."

He came back across the room, his brown eyes on her face.

"Don't make me out the complete brute, Fay, please!" It was the first time in their encounter that he had called her Fay, and she noticed it. "I don't want you to leave the flat at all. I came here because I thought you were going."

"That was Tom."

"Well, you didn't write to me yourself, did you?"

"Not about that," she said, remembering his silence,

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

"but I did write you once. And you didn't reply to me. You ignored my attempt at friendliness. I hated you for it."

He was silent.

"You got my letter, didn't you, David?" She hoped it had never arrived.

"Yes."

"Didn't you feel like writing to me at all?"

"I wanted to, but some silly streak inside prevented me. I liked you—as you know—and disliked you at the same time."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know." His eyes avoided hers, and she felt that he was very like a small boy caught in some misdemeanour. "I was disappointed in you."

"Because—?"

"You know why. I'm not saying you should have been different; it's just that I found you something I did not expect."

"Something I hadn't led you to expect?"

"Perhaps."

"You mean yes. I think I understand." She broke off. "David, I've almost forgotten supper. Look here, I'll get it now, and we can have a real talk over the meal or afterwards. Go and wash."

Some of his gaiety returned. "Hadn't you better go and dress?"

She followed his gaze and looked down at herself. Her dressing-gown had opened, revealing her silk night-dress clingingly transparent against her slim body. Undismayed, she said: "I'd rather just have supper like this, if you don't mind?"

"Mind! I like it!"

"I'm glad," she said, on her way to the kitchen. "I want you to like me."

Later, when she had fed him, and he had praised the

supper, and they had talked a lot and laughed, and brought back something of friendliness into their relations, she said: "Come and sit with me. You needn't rush away yet, and if you like to bring that little electric fire in from the bedroom we can turn it on here and be comfortable."

She arranged cushions for his chair, and, when he returned with the heater, was holding out cigarettes to him. His brown eyes had regained their old alertness, and the travelling strain had gone from his face. He looked closely at her as he held a match to her cigarette.

"You look well, Fay."

"That's nice of you. So do you, David."

"It's fine being here again, with you like this," he said.

"It's good to have you here. I was afraid I was going to be lonely to-night. Paddy was a surprise, you see."

He touched her hand. "Let's be pals, Fay. It's damned silly, all this hurting business, don't you think?"

"My fault, David. You can't know how rotten I feel about my share in it."

Then, a little embarrassed by their show of feeling, they fell apart.

"Sit in the armchair," she urged. "And I'll make myself at home on the floor. May I lean against your legs?"

"I'd hate to think you didn't want to!"

He sighed as her head rested upon his knee. "It is good being here again."

"Why did you stay away so long, David? It's months and months."

"Oh, I don't know."

She said flippantly: "You weren't getting a divorce, were you?" and realised that although the thought had never taken shape before, it had subconsciously been present in her as a hope and a possibility. It had sprung

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

to life from some secret recess in her brain, where its seed had been planted weeks before. The words startled her as she spoke them. Deep down in her there must have lived this truant belief, this hope, that David Musgrave's long absence had been connected with a marital release that would react to her own benefit. Yet never consciously had she fostered the hope; not once had she seen it before her eyes as she saw it now that it was spoken.

And as she said the words, the idea did not appear too fantastic. It was a last possibility. The lingering hope in her burned brighter while she put the flippant question, and then died as she turned up her head and met the man's eyes.

In a flash he, too, had realised all that was behind the question. He had understanding and sympathy. He could read something of the pathos of the question.

He shook his head.

"'Fraid not, Fay. Nothing like that. I was busy on the new book."

She looked into the red glow of the heater as, once before sitting in the same position with this same man, she had looked into the winter fire. Life had thrown them together again at the moment she needed him most. Wasn't that something to be grateful for? She did not let him see her eyes for some time.

He said presently: "Fay, last time you were here with me you left a message on my pillow. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"After I had been a bit of a brute. It was good of you."

"It was what I felt, David."

"And still feel?"

"More than ever."

His hands slipped down. She put her own over them and pressed them tightly against her.

"And I love you, Fay," he whispered. "Do you believe it?"

"Of course I do, darling."

"In spite of my way of looking at things?"

She said generously: "In spite of *my* way."

"I'm just made in my own funny way."

And she, remembering the cold face of Princess Sadrine, said: "I can guess what it is, David. You may change some day."

"You know, I don't honestly think so."

"You're discouragingly honest, David."

"Is it a fault, Fay?"

"No, but it's the devil!"

"I'm sorry about it. But it's me."

She could face him again, and she did so, turning round to see his tanned, bafflingly smiling face. His eyes were warm with tenderness, and she caught her breath sharply as she realised how much she cared for him.

"What are you going to do now that Paddy's gone?"

"I haven't had time to think yet, but I'll probably get a tiny flat somewhere and carry on."

"Carry on! That's a good old war phrase, Fay. You hardly hear it nowadays. You and I are both of the damned old war. The generation that's rapidly passing. Do you know we're getting old?"

"You're rather a rotter to remind me of it."

"No." His voice grew serious. "I want to remind you of it. We *are* getting old. *You* are getting old. I mentioned it because I wanted you to realise it."

"David, you can't seriously suppose I don't realise it? I've been realising that—and other things—for some time now."

"Other things?"

Her moment had struck, and she was aware of it. Around them as they sat in the quiet room there was a cloak of sweet intimacy that she desired never to throw

off. Her mood was for surrender. Life had made it so; life and the circumstances that controlled life. There was no recklessness in her. Only a calm acceptance of realities.

Why should she be shut out of life? Why struggle any longer with this paradox existence of easy desires and difficult fulfilments?

"Many other things, David," she said slowly.

She took his hand and slipped it under her loose dressing-gown and pressed it against her breast. There surged through her body a fire of feeling that gave pleasant physical acquiescence to her decision. Its warmth strengthened her, stirred in her an ecstatic tremor. In every part of her she felt his touch and responded to it. She closed her eyes with the sweetness and the wonder of it.

He swung her round, and half-lifting her from the floor drew her to him. He felt the nearness of her beautiful body through the silk nightdress. Her hair with the light behind it was the gleaming glory it had been when he held her in this room before. It was all the same as it had been then.

And it was different.

He tried to speak, but the words died on his lips as she crushed her mouth to his, her eyes still closed, her face wet with tears.

CHAPTER XVI

AND FAY WONDERS

THE warm sunlight of a golden morning streamed into the bedroom. Fay stirred and opened her eyes, staring up at the ceiling. For a minute or two she lingered in that dazed country between sleep and wakefulness, then she turned gently on her side.

David was still sleeping. He had thrown out one arm over the coverlet, and the sleeve of his blue pyjamas had caught at the elbow, leaving the forearm exposed. She smiled as she regarded it. It was strong and well shaped. Her eyes went back to his face, and she lay looking at him. She wanted to get up to gaze out of the window at the new day, but that would have disturbed him.

Strangely, her first thought was for Paddy. What a marvellous day she was going to have for her wedding. Warm and sunny, full of hope. She was glad. She smiled happily to herself and wished Paddy had been there to hear what she was thinking. But, of course, that was absurd. How could Paddy be there in the room with David lying in bed? She almost burst out laughing at the thought, but clenched her teeth and tried to visualise serious things, and the laughter was defeated.

She was at peace with the world. She ought to have been stricken with guilt, according to all the tales she had been told, lying in a torture of fear for the future. But if she was conscious of any change in her it was of a change that brought tranquillity where there had

been conflict, and only peace where there had been troubled indecision.

She wished David would wake. It was too beautiful a morning to spend in sleep. But he slept on, breathing deeply. She liked his brown face against the white pillow, and took in every detail of it, hungrily yet critically. She was glad he was so good-looking.

Softly, she raised herself on her elbow to look at the small clock on her table. It was nine o'clock. She'd wake him soon if he didn't stir; they couldn't be late for the wedding. She decided to give him five more minutes, and lay down again, her eyes wide open.

Her thoughts remained with David. She was lonely for him to wake up. She felt now that she would always be lonely without him. Her future lay in his hands, her happiness in his brown eyes and funny mouth. If he smiled, all life would be full of laughter. If he didn't, it would be a poor empty thing. With his love she could go happily into the future, afraid of nothing. Without his love. . . .

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the thought. To-day was not the day to think of it all, to dread the grey side of life. Yesterday's dread had been killed; why couldn't to-morrow's be despatched in the same way?

She turned to wake him, and found his eyes open, full of life, looking at her. There was laughter in them that sent a thrill of joy through her.

"David," she said suddenly. "I think life is full of false fears."

He smiled lazily. "That's a funny thing to say the moment you wake."

"I've been awake for hours and hours," she protested. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Haven't the slightest idea. Nor do I care. I'm

happy here, thanks." He touched her with his hand. "Fay, you're quite the wonderfulest thing that ever happened."

"Don't exaggerate," she said, pretending to be severe. "Have you forgotten that we've to be at Chelsea Registry at twelve o'clock to-day?"

"Good Lord, I had." He looked about the room. "I say, aren't they getting a great day for it?"

"I'm glad. It's a day full of hope, David."

They lay silent for a minute, then he said, chuckling: "We're a bright pair to go and bless an innocent couple about to take on the arduous duties of matrimony, aren't we?"

She laughed. "I hadn't thought of that, David. It does rather seem sacrilege and all that sort of thing, doesn't it? I've half a mind to stay away now!"

"Really? Well, just change your mind. We're going to be there, Fay."

"David, nothing can keep me away!"

"Not even *me*?"

"You! Pooh!" She looked at him tenderly. "From a wedding? You least of all, David!"

But presently when they had bathed and breakfasted and made ready for Paddy's wedding, to the accompaniment of much laughter and joyous ragging, they found they had still time to spare. And an odd desire came to Fay Sharon to fill in the minutes writing a letter to her father.

She had not been home since the day she went down with Tom, and it did not seem that events would so shape themselves that she would see her father or mother again for a long time. Yet, by an instinct of tradition, or upbringing, or something deeper that she could not grasp, she was moved to write to those people who had once meant so much in her life, and from whom she seemed now definitely to be removed.

THIS YEAR NEXT YEAR

She found the letter difficult to write, but got over its stiffest hurdle with some skill and a little sincerity :

" . . . a kind of secretaryship to a well-known novelist. This will be much better than the worry and work of the newspaper office, and I think my own work will benefit by it.

"The main point is that I shall probably have to live in Paris a great deal, but I am very keen on that, and quite excited at the prospect. I am so happy about it all.

"I shall not be out of London all the time, of course. Apparently, I'll have to come over from time to time. But Paris *will* improve my French so, and I'm delighted.

"Of course, I can't say how long the thing will last. . . ."

She looked up from the letter, her eyes thoughtful, a little sad. David was examining the picture page of the morning paper. He looked strong, safe, somehow reliable. He meant so much to her !

He turned, the paper in his hand, and, seeing her idle for the moment, indicated a printed photograph with his finger.

"Rather a beautiful woman, isn't she?" he said.

THE END

